Migration Letters

Volume: 21, No: 6 (2024), pp. 253-262

ISSN: 1741-8984 (Print) ISSN: 1741-8992 (Online)

www.migrationletters.com

The Elections Of 2018: An Elite Capture

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Abstract

In Pakistan, elite capture is often pervasive and deeply entrenched in various aspects of the society and economy. The Political elite, the wealthy individuals, and the powerful interest groups tend to dominate decision-making processes, economic opportunities, and resources, resulting in a system where a small elite group extracts disproportionate benefits while the majority of the population struggles with poverty, lack of access to basic services, and limited opportunities for advancement. Elite capture is also evident in the electoral history of Pakistan, where elites have always tried[1] to secure their interest through political engineering. The General Elections of 2018 also show various evidences of elite capture in Pakistan. This study aims to explore the tentacles of elite capture in these elections. This study is qualitative in nature, based on both primary as well as secondary data. Procedurally, primary data has been collected through interviews conducted with experts in the relevant field, which has then been analyzed through the technique of thematic analysis. Philosophically, the study adopts a relativist ontological and subjectivist epistemological position. The study finds that the General Elections of 2018 exemplify elite capture, where different elite classes preserved their interests by manipulating the voting behaviors of the people. The study further suggests a need for transparency, fair and free elections, the rule of law, political awareness, and a well-responsive political culture in the country.

Keywords: *Elite Capture, Elections, Political Engineering, Political Maneuvering, RTS, Rejected Votes, Legal Meddling.*

Introduction

Elite Capture

Elite capture refers to the phenomenon of local elites controlling superior economic and political status to usurp the benefits of community development and decentralization programs that transfer control over public assets to lower-level governance structures, which are assumed to be more susceptible to elite capture because of greater opportunity for collusion. According to Diya Dutta, elite capture is the presence of unequal access to power. Some elements have greater access to power due to lineage, caste, gender, economic wealth, or some other reason. Resources and public goods such as attention, knowledge, and values are unfairly distributed just as much as political power and material wealth are. Elite capture is symptomatic of social systems with an unequal balance of power. (Taiwo, 2022). Elite capture is a systematic

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problem. This type of political economy is the outcome of the state, which empowers some people at the top and rubs, disempowers, and kills some people at the bottom (Ashraf, 2024).

In Pakistan, opportunities, power, and wealth are limited to an unchanging elite. The top businessmen in America, like Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and Jeff Bezos, etc., did not belong to wealthy families. The father of the former US president Ronald Reagan was a salesman, the father of Bill Clinton was an alcoholic, while Barack Obama was raised by a single mother. But in Pakistan, almost every successful person owes their success to their father's position (Ismail, 2022). In Pakistan, often, lawyers' children go on to become lawyers, doctors' children become doctors, ulemas' children become ulemas, and a singer's son becomes a singer. There are certain families of politicians, businessmen, the army, and bureaucracy where several generations have produced generals, politicians, seths, and high-ranking officers. In such a society, a driver's son is destined to become a driver, a sweeper's son is constrained to become a sweeper, while the daughter of a maid ends up becoming a maid. Political power revolves around personalities rather than political parties. The real predictor of success is not intelligence and ability, but a person's father's status (Ismail, 2022).

According to the Oxfam Pakistan inequality report 2020, the top 1% Pakistanis own 10 times more wealth than the bottom 50% (Sabir & Nawaz, 2023). On the other hand, the elite use their influence to live comfortable lives by providing their children with better health, education, and employment opportunities, leading to intergenerational wealth inequality. The role of the elite in perpetuating inequality cannot be overstated. They have established their monopoly over industries, land, and key positions etc. They have dominated the government and private sectors and have little interest in promoting the interests of the population. They secure their interest by diverting policies and laws in their favor.

How Does Elite Capture Occur?

The elite become influential from their ability to control resources, which have considerable economic value. Their control over institutions and productive assets enables them to influence the allocation of resources and authority (Amsden, Dicaprio, & Robinson, 2012). For elite capture, the elite control political institutions, economic resources, and the process of decision-making.

Capture of Economic Resources

The elite in Pakistan often focus on capturing a diverse range of resources to consolidate their power, influence, and wealth. During a discussion with Ikram Hoti, he pointed out that elites in Pakistan frequently target land as a valuable resource to acquire for agricultural purposes, real estate development, industrial projects, and commercial ventures. Land ownership provides the elite with control over key assets and opportunities for profitable investments (Hoti, 2024). He added that elite capture of natural resources, such as minerals, oil, gas, coal, and water, allows them to benefit from the extraction, processing, and distribution of these valuable resources. Access to natural resources often translates into substantial economic gains and strategic advantages. The elite in Pakistan aim to capture financial capital by amassing wealth, controlling investment portfolios, owning stakes in businesses, and leveraging financial assets to generate returns and expand their economic power. The elite may capture human capital by establishing networks of skilled professionals, influential individuals, and loyal supporters who can provide expertise, resources, and connections to promote their interests (Hoti, 2024).

Policy Capture

Elite groups in Pakistan control a substantial portion of the country's wealth and resources. This economic power allows them to lobby for policies that benefit their businesses and industries. These policies include tax breaks, subsidies, and regulatory loopholes that benefit their interests. Elites in Pakistan often frame policies in their favor to maintain and increase their power, wealth, and influence. According to Mahtab Haider, elites often advocate for policies that protect their businesses and industries, such as tax breaks, subsidies, and regulatory loopholes that benefit their interests. They may seek policies that grant them access to lucrative land and natural resources, often at the expense of marginalized communities or the environment. They may influence trade and investment policies to favor their business dealings, such as preferential treatment for their companies in international trade agreements (Haider, 2018). The elite may seek to capture regulatory agencies or shape regulations in a way that favors their industries and protects them from competition. They may influence social policies to maintain their privileged status, such as advocating against progressive taxation or social welfare programs that could redistribute wealth. They may promote security and defense policies that prioritize their security interests or benefit the military-industrial complex in which they have a stake (Hoti, 2024).

Capture of Political Institutions

According to Ikram Hoti, elites in Pakistan act as a gang that has captured a range of political institutions to consolidate their power and influence (Hoti, 2024). They may capture legislative bodies, such as the National Assembly and the Senate, by influencing elections, funding political campaigns, and exerting control over elected representatives (Farmanullah, 2023). They may seek to capture the executive branch, including the office of the Prime Minister and the President, by influencing appointments, policies, and decision-making processes (Khan, 2021). The elite may capture the bureaucracy by placing loyalists in key administrative positions, exerting influence over government agencies, and using bureaucratic channels to advance their interests (Khan D. U., 2023). They try to capture the judiciary by influencing judicial appointments, manipulating legal processes, and seeking favorable rulings in cases that affect their interests (Ahad, 2023).

Elites often seek to capture political parties by funding campaigns, supporting preferred candidates, and influencing party decisions and platforms to align with their interests (Farmanullah, 2023). They capture local government institutions, such as municipal councils and district administrations, by controlling resources, influencing elections, and appointing allies to key positions (Syed A. , 2024). They may also attempt to capture the Election Commission of Pakistan by influencing electoral processes, manipulating voter registration, and challenging election outcomes that do not favor them (Syed A. , 2024).

Ways to Capture Elites, including politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders, hold significant political power in Pakistan. They often work together to shape policies that serve their interests and maintain their influence. In Pakistan, most of the elite families have distributed their members among different institutions. They have connections with the armed forces, the bureaucracy, and the top-ranking political parties. They also change their parties according to the needs of the time. So, mostly they are in touch with the parliament and other important institutions and influence the process of policy formulation (Haq, 2024).

Elite groups in Pakistan control a substantial portion of the country's wealth and resources. This economic power allows them to lobby for policies that benefit their businesses and industries (Kiani, 2020). They are often interconnected through family ties, business relationships, and social circles. These networks enable them to coordinate and collaborate on policy issues (Khan, 2021).

Elite groups have direct access to key decision-makers, including government officials and politicians. This access allows them to influence policy decisions behind the scenes (Farmanullah, 2023). These groups, in Pakistan, often own or have significant control over media outlets. This influence allows them to shape public opinion and influence the policy agenda. Corruption is prevalent among elites in Pakistan, allowing them to manipulate policy formation for their benefit. They may offer bribes or engage in other forms of corruption to secure favorable policies (Turk, 2024). Elites employ various tactics to capture political institutions and maintain their dominance in the country's political landscape. They leverage their economic power to fund political campaigns, parties, and candidates. By providing financial support, elites can gain access to and influence the key decision-makers in political institutions (Haider, 2024). Many elite families in Pakistan have established political dynasties, with multiple generations holding positions of power and influence. This familial control over political institutions helps the elite maintain their dominance (Ali L. , 2024). The elite often engage in cronyism and nepotism, appointing friends, family members, and associates to key positions in political institutions. This allows them to maintain control and ensure loyalty within these institutions (Khan, 2024). The elite may seek to capture regulatory bodies and oversight agencies to prevent scrutiny of their activities and maintain a favorable operating environment for their businesses. By employing these tactics and others, they, in Pakistan, can capture and influence political institutions, shaping policies and decisions to serve their interests and maintain their grip on power (Ishaq, 2024).

Literature Review

Pasha (2020) has highlighted the global severe inequality, with more than 734 million people worldwide living in extreme poverty, subsisting on less than US$1.9 per day. On the other hand, the billionaires are getting richer day by day. He outlines three principal drivers of inequality in Pakistan: power, people, and policy, in his report, PNHDR 2020. According to him, different groups use their influence to secure preferential treatment within the legal and regulatory framework. He has identified a sum of eight groups that have captured the state apparatus and use the state resources for their benefit. These include the military establishment, state-owned enterprises, exporters, high net worth individuals, industries, large traders, banks, and the feudal class. Richard (2014), states that unequal economic distribution in the present-day world is consequent to elite capture of the economy. In the majority of countries, economic inequality is increasing rapidly. Half of the world’s capital belongs to the richest one percent and half to the remaining 99%. The wealth of the richest 1% of people is $110 trillion. That is 65 times the total wealth of the bottom 70% of the world. This has been identified as a major risk to human progress by the World Economic Forum. In these countries, the governments serve the interests of the economic elite and do not care about the ordinary people. According to (Baber, 2022) when powerful wielders of politics like the civil-military bureaucracy, the big landlords, and the businessmen control the process of policy formulation and make the rules of the game themselves to safeguard the interest of their group, it results in the unequal distribution of wealth in the nation and leads to the alienation of citizens from the state. Elite capture involves the making of policy by a small group to use public wealth for their benefit.

(Murtaza, 2024) states that a review of the electoral history of the country shows that no election in Pakistan has been conducted free and fair. Starting from the first PM of Pakistan, Liaqat Ali Khan, he claims that Khan was not elected by the then constituent assembly but was appointed by M.A. Jinnah. Subsequently, Liaqat Ali Khan urged the British Government to appoint Mr. Jinnah as Governor General. During the first two decades after 1947, several Prime Ministers were appointed and dismissed by the then-Governors General. The elections of 1971 were the only elections that are considered as free and fair, but their legitimacy was compromised when power was not transferred to the Awami League. Among the seven elections held from 1970 to 1999, six were rigged to the extent of changing the victors, while the elections of 1988 were partially rigged. According to the report of the European Union Election Observers, rigging changed the final winners in the elections of 2002 and 2018, and also reduced the winning margin of the PPP in 2008. Abbas (2020) has given a brief history of the way the Pakistani elite have captured elections. The events he has mentioned from 1977 to 2018 provide insights into how elections are held in the country and the governments are formed and dismissed. He states that the process of rigging starts with not holding the population census on time. This is followed by the process of delimitation of the constituencies, which is often designed to favor one party. Hiring government employees as polling staff is another question in this regard. Delaying results at some of the constituencies is also a tactic of rigging. Apart from this, the election tribunal takes years to decide on election petitions despite having been given a specific timeframe of four months. According to (Muhammad, 2021), before the elections, in Pakistan, a special environment is engineered in support of the party that the civil and military establishment wants to come to power. Then the media starts to speak in support of that party. Electables start to join the party. The jalsas and meetings of the party are made successful, and neutral voters go in support of the same party. This is a type of pre-poll rigging in support of the king's party. Pakistan's military elites did not allow democracy even to remain a "counting process." Western democracy was "Kani," our military leaders made it "blind". This means that the electoral process in Pakistan is rigged at every level. The first rigging begins with a mess in the voter lists. The second rigging comes from the election campaign imbalance. The third fraud is in the counting of votes. Even so, owning one is still beyond the reach of the average person. There is "transparent honesty" all over the world. Here we have "transparent fraud". This is the height of political corruption.

Research Gap

In recent times, extensive research has focused on the process of rigging in elections. A detailed literature is available regarding the history of rigging since independence. Additionally, literature also provides data about rigging in the elections of 2018. But a significant research gap exists to show the role of the elite behind the rigging in the 2018 elections. This research study explains the process of rigging in the elections of 2018 as an elite capture.

Research Methodology

This research study is qualitative in nature. The study addresses two questions, i.e., (i) were the elections of 2018 captured by elites? (ii) How were these elections captured? The main objectives of the study are to explore the role of the elite in capturing the 2018 general elections and the way these elections were captured. The study uses both primary as well as secondary data. Primary data has been collected through interviews keeping the information power framework in view. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were held with experts like academicians, journalists, and retired bureaucrats. The data has been analyzed through thematic analysis. In addition, the study adopts the interpretivist paradigm, in terms of the relativist ontological and subjectivist epistemological position.

The Elections 2018

The elections of 2018 were held on 25th of July 2018 in the backdrop of Nawaz's arrest, the entry of jihadi outfit and the rise of Imran Khan in the electoral pray (VIF, 2018). Opinion polls for these elections, held by different pollsters like IPOR, Gallup Pakistan, and Pulse Consultant etc., had shown leads for Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz, but in the contest, PTI emerged as the leading party in the National Assembly of Pakistan. PILDAT, in its report issued in May 2018, declared the pre-poll environment unfair. According to this report, the military was not neutral towards the competing political parties and contesting candidates. PILDAT also noted the lack of freedom of private media and declared the neutrality of NAB and the judiciary as unfair (Afzal, 2019).

In an interview with Geo News, the renowned Journalist Hamid Mir stated that through the elections of 2018, Imran Khan was imposed by the establishment on the people of Pakistan. According to him, General Pasha had started an assignment to bring Imran Khan to power in 2011. He claimed that the elections of 2018 crossed all the limits of rigging. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has declared these elections the dirtiest in the history of the country. The level playing field was denied through pre-poll manipulation and political engineering in favor of PTI. The colossal mismanagement on polling day, particularly in the counting of votes and the inexplicable delay in declaring results, especially in Karachi, developed the perception that the elections had been rigged. The pre-poll manipulations, like compelling the independent members and smaller parties to join PTI to make a government in Islamabad and also in Lahore, empowered the perception that the system was struggling to ensure a PTI government (Shah & Sareen, 2018). Most of my respondents declared the elections of 2018 as an example of captured elections due to the following events

Setback in Baluchistan assembly

Before the general elections of 2018, PML-N faced an internal rebellion within their elected members from the Baluchistan Assembly. The then CM of Baluchistan, Sanaullah Zehri, who belonged to PML-N, was removed by a faction of PML-N dissidents along with the members of the assembly from PML-Q and appointed Abdul Quddus Bizenjo as the new CM. This disturbance was suspected to have been engineered by the army to influence the elections of the Senate in the Baluchistan assembly (VIF, 2018).

Foundation of Baluchistan Awami Party

Baluchistan Awami Party was formed in March 2018, just before the elections of July 2018. This party was formed by the military establishment and consisted of "electable(s)" from both the Pushtun and Baluch ethnicities. This party was founded by the deviated members of PML-Q and PML-N along with the then CM of the province. The party was joined by the tribal leaders who rule their regions like monarchs, who have been part of every provincial government (Akhter, Waheed, & Abid, 2022).

There are two opposing theories regarding the sudden birth of BAP. According to one theory, it was founded by the anti-ethnic nationalist (Federalist) politicians of Baluchistan, while the other asserts that this was created by the Pakistani deep state. But the sudden formation of BAP by a group of politicians without a common ideology in a province like Baluchistan, having a long history of political discord and individual dominance, supports the second theory. Moreover, BAP was comprised of those politicians who were well-known electable(s). They were tribal chiefs who ruled their districts like kings. In order to keep themselves in power, they change their party conveniently. BAP made a coalition government in Baluchistan as a result of the general elections of 2018. It also supported PTI in the National Assembly to elect

Imran Khan as the PM. It fully supported the government of PTI but withdrew its support for Imran's government when the opposition decided to bring a no-confidence motion against the then PM Imran Khan and supported the move (Ullah, Ali, & Khan, 2024)

Senate Elections of 2018

In order to fill in the vacancies for 52 retiring senators, elections were held in March 2018. The political wrangling that took place with a nod from the establishment showed that these elections were a dry run to keep PML-N out of power. The Election Commission of Pakistan declared the senate nominees of PML-N as independent candidates because they were nominated by Nawaz Sharif, whose all official decisions being the president of the party were nullified by the Supreme Court. The PML-N, despite having a majority of seats in the senate, failed to elect its member for the chairman and deputy chairmanship (VIF, 2018).

Tehreek-e-Labaik

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan was founded by the late Khadim Hussain Rizvi in August 2015. It is a far-right Islamic extremist party. In the general elections of 2018, TLP showed an extraordinary electoral performance by securing the third-highest number of votes in Punjab (Batool, Yilmaz, & Shakil , 2023), while in the National Assembly, TLP secured 2.2 million votes, emerging as the 5th most popular party in the country (Shahid, 2018). In 2011, Salman Taseer, the then-governor of Punjab, was assassinated by his police guard as he defended Asia Bibi, a Christian lady accused of blasphemy, and publicly opposed the laws of blasphemy in Pakistan. The police guard, Mumtaz Qadri, was arrested and put on trial. He became a cult hero for Barelvis when he was awarded the death penalty by an anti-terrorism court in 2011. He was hanged in 2016 during the reign of Nawaz Sharif. Due to this, a large section of Nawaz Voters, who were Barelvis, supported TLP against Nawaz. According to Raza Rumi, a section of the state was using TLP against PML-N (Rumi, 2021). A Gallup survey shows that in the elections of 2018, in Punjab, 46% of voters of TLP said that they had voted for PML-N in the elections of 2013. In Punjab, PML-N lost 14 constituencies due to the emergence of TLP, as the margin of victory was less than the votes got by TLP. Another survey shows that in the elections of 2018, PML-N lost 9% of its vote bank nationally, out of which 3 to 4% was lost to TLP (Shah & Sareen, 2018).

South Punjab Defection

The periodic rise in the Seraiki sentiments, in South Punjab, surfaces almost in every election. In the elections of 2018, the electable(s) of South Punjab, who were under the control of the army, made the situation worse for PML-N (VIF, 2018) . Having a population of 35 million, divided into three divisions, South Punjab has 48 seats in the National Assembly. In early April, two members of the provincial assembly and six members of the NA broke their allegiance with PML-N and formed "Janoobi Punjab Subai Mahaz" and started a campaign for a separate Saraiki province. The number of defectors increased subsequently, led by Makhdoom Khusro Bakhtiar, the then sitting member of NA from Rahim Yar Khan. South Punjab is a region that has remained an easy prey to political engineering. The candidates of PML-N were forced to switch loyalties even after the last date of filing nomination papers and left PML-N without candidates on more than half a dozen seats. Apart from this, many of the electable(s) left PML-N on the eve of elections. Among them, several candidates fought as independent candidates, while some candidates fought on the ticket of PTI (Shah & Sareen, 2018).

Cracks in MQM

In 2016, to facilitate the defection of members of MQM, "Pak Sarzameen Party" was founded under the leadership of Mustafa Kamal, a former leader of MQM. The aim of establishment behind the formation of PSP was to absorb the jailed members of MQM who had been released

on the condition of joining PSP. Similarly, the formation of PSP also divided the vote bank of MQM, which ultimately benefited PTI in urban Sindh.

Restrictions on Media

In the run-up to the elections, sections of mainstream media, including TV stations and Newspapers, experienced restrictions in their reporting. A ban was imposed on the sale of DAWN, a leading newspaper, and it was subjected to harassment and intimidation, due to its report about a meeting between members of the PML-N government and the army and the ideological rift between them. Dawn News and Geo News channels were kept off the air, and advertisers were told not to promote their products in these media houses. Jang and Geo group was subjected to financial pressure and intimidation, and it was unable to pay its staff for three months until the senior editors appeared to have reached a compromise with the military (Shah & Sareen, 2018).

Legal Meddling

The judiciary of the country was indifferent, and it had fanned the fire of self-censorship as it took no action against the harassment of journalists. Three months before the elections, Nawaz Sharif was disqualified from contesting elections by the Supreme Court on the charges of corruption. The sentence of Nawaz, his daughter, and son-in-law was considered a targeted assassination of the career of politicians.

Rejected Votes

According to FAFEN, there was an increase of 11.7% in the number of votes rejected in the polls of 2018 as compared to the elections of 2013. In 49 constituencies of the National Assembly, the number of rejected votes surpassed the margin of victory. Among these constituencies, 26 were in Punjab, 11 in Sindh, and six each in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. Among these 49 seats, 21 were won by PTI, 11 by PML-N, six by PPP, three by BAP, two by GDA, two by independent candidates, and one each by ANP, MMA, JWP, and PML-Q (Shah & Sareen, 2018).

Failure of the Result Transmission System

During the elections of 2018, a result transmission system was introduced by the Election Commission of Pakistan. The system was not tested previously on a large scale. It took more than 56 hours, after the conclusion of the voting process, for the Election Commission to release the results. The RTS was the main component to ensure that the result transmitted to RO was not tampered with on the way. The polling officers had to carry Form 45 physically to the office of the RO due to the breakdown of the RTS. According to the reports, some ROs reached the RO offices after a long delay (PILDAT, 2018).

Political Maneuvering

In the run-up to elections, various politicians of PML-N alleged that the military establishment was forcing them to join PTI or declare themselves as independent candidates. Before elections, about 21 legislators of PML-N joined PTI, and many others declared themselves independent (Afzal, 2019). In these elections, PTI gave more than 100 tickets to the so-called electable(s). This controversial process of ticket awarding made it difficult for the board to make a satisfactory decision. In Baluchistan, the entire party of PML (N) resigned and formed a new party known as “Baluchistan Awami Party”. The main hub of electables (s) was Punjab, where a large number of electables (s) left PML(N) and joined PTI. PTI used a new terminology of “wicket gira di” (fall of wicket), when an electable used to join PTI (Islam, Zubair & Muhammad, 2019). In the elections of 2018, 70% of Pakistani youth, aged between 18 and 25, cast their vote for the first time. These 28 million votes could change the fate of the country.

During these elections, PTI got 9.28 million more votes than in the general elections of 2013. Electables played a key role in this vote bank surge and contributed 4.2 million votes to PTI (Muhammad, 2021)

A Complicated Polling Day

The turnout on the Election Day was 53% despite a terrorist attack at a polling station in Quetta, killing more than 30 people. Irregularities were reported in vote-counting protocols at different polling stations in the hours after the poll closed amid a heavy military presence, leading to allegations of rigging by different political parties. The delayed results of the elections caused confusion and further speculation of rigging (Afzal, 2019). The above discussion shows that, like other elections, the elections of 2018 were rigged. These elections were rigged by the military establishment to maintain its monopoly over the political system of the country. This shows the extractive nature of the institution of the military that has always suppressed broader participation and maintained elite control.

Conclusion

Elite capture is the process by which powerful elites use the resources of poor people and shape policies to protect their interests. It is a situation where elites design the process of development according to their own needs or use the resources of development for their gain. Elite capture is the monopoly of the haves over the resources of the have-nots. The history of elections in Pakistan is full of evidences of rigging and political engineering. The elite have always tried to secure their interest by affecting the results of elections. The elections of 2018 also exemplify elite capture, where different elite classes like the military, business, and feudal elites preserved their interests by co-opting the anti-establishment sentiments.

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