**Identity search**

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WHO are we, really? In democracies, that question is stirred by elections. Voters tackle the question on a personal basis, translating their answers into political acts by casting ballots for people and policies who reflect their priorities. The electoral outcome is then a reflection of a nation, its values and needs.

This personal-is-political perception of democracy is driving post-election narratives in the US. And so we have a story of a US cleft in twain. Even Joe Biden`s most ardent supporters cannot ignore the 72 million compatriots who voted for Donald Trump. The huge voter turnout for the two men is being read as a tale of two Americas: one that is white, rural, racist, xenophobic, pro-Bible, anti-abortion; another that is multiracial, urban, progressive, environmentally minded and godless.

But the data tells a more convoluted story.

For example, the inconvenient fact that Trump made gains among non-white voters, increasing his share of the African-American vote from eight to 12 per cent, and the Latino vote from 29pc to 32pc, from 2016 to 2020.

Writing in The Correspondent, Nesrine Malik highlights the motivations beyond identity politics of many Trump voters, arguing that voters make rational trade-of fs in order to `maximise [theirl little stake` in poorly functioning democratic systems. She emphasises the role of enriched corporate shareholders, wealthy individuals enjoying tax loopholes, investors, entrepreneurs benefiting from looser regulation, and low-skill worl(ers seeing higher wages in buoying Trump even as he lost.

In this nuance lies lessons for Pakistan.

Recent protests, and political campaign rhetoric in the Gilgit-Baltistan legislative elections, have tried to create a binary narrative about Pakistan too. This narrative pits democracy against hybridity, people against the establishment. This narrative has created some turbulence, but only to the extent that it pressurises the typical, seatat-the-table patronage politics of Pakistan.

The narrative will not provoke existential inquiry or drive a referendum on national identity.

Flag-wavers will say this is because we know exactly who we are, that Pakistan`s supra-narrative is well-established. We are pro-Islam, anti-India, patriotic in our military. Political scientists will say it`s because we know how the system works, that the process of maximising stakes that Malik writes about is well-established. Ethno-linguistic patronage politics breeds a perverse stability; it is not about big ideas, but small transactions at the level of the thana and katcheri, the pir and patwari. Mainstream parties may complain about `selectors`, but them-selves rely on `electables`.

If we`re honest, we know nothing.

Electoral machinations have long-obscured voter expression. Add to that military interventions and the paucity of data, and the picture becomes more opaque.

But things are changing. Problematic as it was, the 2018 election showed appetite for something new. The PTI`s anti-corruption sloganeering-our versionof Trump`draining the swamp` resonated (less so as the administration`s term has progressed).

Sociopolitical changes, fuelled by urbanisation, the pandemic, climate disasters and geopolitical shifts, will create more space for new stories.

We can already see this in the growing attention to issues like sexual violence, health insurance, student rights, policing.

The specificity of the PTM`s demands on antidiscrimination, landmines and due process also hint at future programmatic politics.

We have not yet tapped our voters` true drivers and motivations. A 2014 study by Ghazala Mansuri and Xavier Giné in Sindhshowed that women who were encouraged to vote through a non-partisan initiative were more likely to vote for a different party than the one selected by the male head of their household, andmore likely to vote for the party with the second-highest vote count rather than the winning party. This suggests that rather than opt for the obvious electable, they were likely backing politicians with policies that appealed.

The growing complexity of voter motivations is becoming evident in unlikely contexts. Issues such as net freedom have been thepreserve ofjournalistsand digitalrights activists, whose positions could be quickly dismissed as pornographic or treasonous.

But the issue is now relevant to corporates eyeing e-commerce, and sensing the reluctance of tech giants to work in a stifling cyber environment. The conflation of a free speech and economic issue means that political parties will not be able to rely on fallback partylines and policy approaches.

For the national trajectory to become apparent, we need a relatively free election in which mainstream parties have the courage to back service delivery-focused policies. Only then will we see what complex stories Pakistani voters have to tell. We may even find out who we are. The writer is a freelance joumalist.

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