**Stolen Votes, Silent Democracy**

**It is imperative for us, as citizens, to maintain a watchful and unwave-ring dedication to preserving the funda-mental tenets of democracy.**

[Behroz Dashti](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/behroz-dashti)

February 19, 2024

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns), [Newspaper](https://www.nation.com.pk/newspaper)

The importance of free and fair elections for a democratic nation cannot be exaggerated. The presence of these principles is es­sential for the establishment of a genuine and inclusive govern­ment, while their absence significantly impacts the political environ­ment of the nation.

To begin with, the presence of free and fair elections guaran­tees the democratic principle of popular sovereignty. Citizens are granted the authority to select their representatives and are able to hold them responsible by exercising their voting rights. When the integrity of this entitlement is compromised by accusations of manipulation, the expression of the public is suppressed, gradually eroding the fundamental essence of de­mocracy. Furthermore, the presence of free and fair elections pro­motes the establishment of legitimacy and trust. When elections are seen as transparent and credible, the resulting government gains high­er levels of public trust and acceptance. Consequently, this promotes stability and facilitates the establishment of efficient governance. On the other hand, elections that are tainted by allegations of manipula­tion give rise to public discontent and instability, which could potential­ly put the democratic system at risk.

[Thousands in Gaza suffering 'cruelty of hunger and malnutrition': UN](https://www.nation.com.pk/23-Feb-2024/thousands-in-gaza-suffering-cruelty-of-hunger-and-malnutrition-un)

Furthermore, the presence of free and fair elections fosters a climate of peaceful political rivalry. When candidates are provided with equal opportunities and voters are able to express their preferences without restrictions, the competition for political power occurs through law­ful methods. This mitigates the likelihood of employing violence or un­democratic methods to acquire power, thereby ensuring the peaceful transition of authority. Within the particular circumstances of Pakistan, the disputed 2024 elections underscore the vulnerability of these prin­ciples. Addressing inquiries regarding the equity of the elections is of utmost importance, not only for ascertaining the legitimate governing body, but also for reinstating public confidence in the democratic pro­cedure. Conducting comprehensive inquiries, ensuring impartial legal procedures, and addressing legitimate concerns are crucial for estab­lishing a solid basis for the future.

[18 students held in Punjab University clash](https://www.nation.com.pk/23-Feb-2024/18-students-held-in-punjab-university-clash)

As previously stated, the fundamental principle of democracy is the in­violability of the electoral procedure, guaranteeing that each vote holds significance and accurately represents the desires of the populace. Re­grettably, Pakistan’s recent elections have deviated from this principle. Consider the instance of elections in my constituency, specifically PB-27. The recent election in PB-27 was tainted by flagrant instances of fraud and manipulation, which have cast a somber cloud over the cherished democratic principles we uphold. The residents of PB-27 were shocked to witness the undermining of their democratic privileges. Jameel Ahmed Dashti, the rightful winner, was unjustly deprived of victory and it was in­stead awarded to an undeserving candidate, Barkat Ali. This subversion of democracy transpired through a sequence of cunning maneuvers that eroded the credibility of Pakistan’s electoral system. Although there was undeniable evidence of misconduct, including the issuance of Form 45s by the presiding officers on the election day in support of Jameel Ahmed Dashti, the Returning Officer (RO) inexplicably proclaimed Barkat Ali as the victor. Barkat Ali’s assertion of triumph, predicated on garnering more than 16,000 votes in regions where voting was hindered due to insurgen­cy and militancy, lacks rationality and serves as a glaring illustration of electoral misconduct. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the fraud was extensive, as Barkat Ali received no votes in 35 out of the total 56 polling stations in the constituency. The sudden accumulation of 15,144 votes in only 19 polling stations by this candidate is highly implau­sible, suggesting a deliberate act of fraudulent manipulation.

[Two killed in petrol agency fire incident](https://www.nation.com.pk/23-Feb-2024/two-killed-in-petrol-agency-fire-incident)

A severe incident occurred at Government Boys School Gawak Mand, in which the ballot papers were lacking a presiding officer. This resulted in the voters being deprived of their right to vote, leading to a state of cha­os. The video circulating on social media highlights the clear disregard for the democratic process in PB-27. The residents of PB-27 are entitled to justice and accountability for the undermining of their democratic rights. The electoral authorities should conduct a comprehensive investigation into these fraudulent activities and ensure that those responsible are held liable. The principles of democracy, including transparency, fairness, and respect for the people’s will, were blatantly disregarded in PB-27. It is im­perative for us, as citizens, to maintain a watchful and unwavering dedi­cation to preserving the fundamental tenets of democracy. The citizens of PB-27 have expressed their opinions through their votes, and the dis­honest behavior of a small group should not be allowed to suppress their voices. Now is the moment to regain control of our democratic system and reinstate the confidence of the public in our electoral procedures.

[Pneumonia claims five more lives in 24 hours](https://www.nation.com.pk/23-Feb-2024/pneumonia-claims-five-more-lives-in-24-hours)

**Behroz Dashti**
The writer is a freelancer. He has a Masters in Political Science from Punjab University.