**Do parties understand youth bulge?**

BY A H M E D B I L A L M E H B O O B 2022-09-10

PAKISTAN is the 46th youngest country with a median age of 20.4 years among 237 countries and territories in the world, according to UN Population Division statistics released this year. Among nine (if Iran is included) South Asian countries, Pakistan is the second youngest, ranked only after Afghanistan. According to the 2017 population census, 64 per cent of the country`s population was under 30 years and more than 60 million or 29pc of the total population belonged to the 15-to-29-years segment categorised as youth.

According to Election Commission figures for registered voters released in November 2021, the largest of the six age cohorts is that of registered voters from 18 to 29 years; it contains 35.57m or 29.4pc of total registered voters.

Despite this extraordinarily high number of young voters who have the ability to swing the election outcome in any direction, political parties in Pakistan have played very little role in recognising their importance and bringing youth to the polling stations. Gallup Pakistan exit polls indicate that the average turnout ofyoung votersin Pakistanin the past eight elections was about 31pc which is a whopping13 percentage points behind the 44pc average turnout of voters of all ages. In the 2018 election, the young voters` turnout significantly increased to 37pc compared to 26pc in 2013 but even this larger youth voter turnout was 14.5 percentage points behind the overall voter turnout of 51.5pc.

The youth voter turnout in neighbouring India with almost similar socioeconomic conditions is much higher. Although the average overall voter turnout of 62.6pc in the past five elections is also higher in India than Pakistan`s statistic of 44.5pc for the last eight general elections, the young voter turnout in India does not lag behind as much. In fact, the youth voter turnout in the past two Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and 2019 surpassed the overall voter turnout. This stark contrast between the youth voter turnout in the two countries calls for serious introspection by our social scientists, the ECP and, above all, political parties which are supposed to be the prime mobilisers of voters.

Political parties` share of youth votes in elections has been a subject of much speculation. Exit polls are the only scientific tool to provide a reasonably accurate assessment of youth support to politicalparties in elections. Gallup exit polls conducted during the 2013 and 2018 elections indicated a near reversal of youth voters` support for the PML-N and PTL The PML-N had enjoyed the support of 30.5pc of young voters of 18 to 29 years in the 2013 election which dwindled to 22pc in 2018. On the other hand, PTI support among the same age group of voters increased from 23.5pc in 2013 to 34pc in 2018. PPP support remained stagnant at 13pc in both the elections. Realising that the overall vote share of the PML-N was 23.66pc in the 2018 election, its support among the youth was slightly lower than the overall support. In the case of PTI, the youth voters` support was higher than the overallparty vote share of 31pc. The PPP`s youth vote share was slightly higher than its overall vote share of 12.67pc. These figures indicate that in 2018, the PTI had greater and the PPP slightly greater appeal for young voters than for other age groups which is contrary to the case of the PML-N.

Another interesting aspect of youth involvement in political parties is the extent to which each party accommodated young people among its roster of candidates for elections. An analysis of the candidates fielded by various parties in 2018 election is quite instructive. Ten major political parties including the PTI, PML-N, PPP (two parties are registered with the ECP), MMA, MQM-P, ANP, NP, BNP-M and TLP fielded 3,606 candidates for 841 constituencies of the national and the four provincial assemblies in the 2018 election, out of which only 686 or just 19pc could be categorised as young, ie, 35 years and below. This compared unfavourably with the number of young voters of age 35 andbelow which constituted 46pc of the total votes, according to statistics released by the ECP. This means that the overall percentage of young candidates across the spectrum of political parties is much less than what the percentage of young voters warrants.

The variation of the percentage of young candidates across political parties is also interesting to analyse. For example, the PTI which is generally regarded as a party of the youth and is perceived to be the most pro-youth party, fielded only 129 candidates of 35 years or below which translates to 16.58pc of its total 778 candidates for the national and four provincial assemblies. This percentage is below the average percentage of young candidates fielded by all 10 political parties studied and half of the 34pc share of young voters which PTI received in 2018. Young candidates constituted only 13pc of the total candidates fielded by PML-N for the national and provincial assemblies, while the PPP fielded 16.78pc young candidates.

Surprisingly, though, the highest percentage 36pc of young candidates was of fered by the T LP in the 2018 election. The Balochistan-based National Party is the only other party which offered above average (19.57pc) young candidates in the election. In the ranking of parties which fielded a higher number of young candidates in 2018, the TLP, therefore stands on top followed by the NP, MQM-P, MMA and PPP. The PTI is much lower down at sixth position in terms of percentage of young candidates. The PML-N ranks eighth.

It is surprising that politicalparties in Pakistan have paid far less attention to the youth in general and young voters and candidates in particular, despite the high number, greater passion and social media activism of young voters. It remains to be seen whether things will significantly change in the next election and which party is able to mobilise and attract a greater percentage of young voters. But one thing is obvious: the youth, if successfully mobilised, will be the single most important factor in swinging the next election.  The writer is president of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development And Transparency.

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