

# Elections and coronavirus in Iran

DR NAAZIR MAHMOOD

On February 21, parliamentary elections were held in Iran. There were 55,000 polling stations to elect 290 members of parliament. Just from Tehran, 30 members of parliament are elected and there are five reserved seats for religious minorities, consisting of Jews, Zoroastrians and Armenian Christians.

There were around 58 million eligible voters of which nearly 30 million were new voters. Only candidates scrutinised and approved by the Guardian Council were allowed to contest. This council consists of 12 nominated members, including six religious scholars of Shia Islam.

—Ali Khamenei the Supreme Leader of Iran— appoints the Guardian Council. The supreme leader also serves as head of the state and is the final authority on political and religious matters. All armed forces, judiciary, media, and the most important state institutions are answerable to the supreme leader.

Ali Khamenei became the supreme leader at the age of 50 in 1989. At that time after the death of Imam Khomeini, the most senior Shia scholar was Ali Montazeri, who had developed some differences with Khomeini six months before his death. That resulted in Montazeri's removal as the deputy to the supreme leader.

In an unexpected move, Ali Khamenei who had remained president of Iran for eight years from 1981 to 1989 became the supreme leader. In all, during the last 40 years after the Islamic revolution in Iran, there have been five presidents who each ruled for eight years.

These were: Ali Khamenei, Hashmi Rafsanjani, Muhammad Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and current president, Hassan Rouhani. But for the parliamentary elections, all candidates have to apply to the Guardian Council that scrutinises and then approves or rejects their candidature. The rejected applicants cannot contest elections. That's how, for the February 21 elections a total of nearly 15,000 applicants approached the council which ultimately rejected over half of the applicants and only 7,000 candidates contested for the 290 seats that were

up for grabs across the 31 provinces of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Most of the rejected candidates were reformists. Presumably, that's why they were deprived of the opportunity to contest elections. Most of the conservative applicants were allowed to run. This time around only 42 percent voters exercised their right and nearly 25 million people cast their votes. Of which 52 percent were men and 48 percent women.

According to official statistics, in comparison with previous elections, the recent turnout of voters was the lowest. Tehran saw only a fourth of the eligible voters cast their vote.

In 2016, the voter turnout had been over 60 percent. One of the reasons for the low turnout was the fact that most reformist applicants were not allowed to contest. These included 80 incumbent members of parliament.

Obviously, when people realise that only officially approved candidates can contest elections, they lose trust in the process. Rejecting 80 incumbent members of parliament was a clear indication that the Guardian Council was not in a mood to allow anyone who could potentially differ with, or challenge, the opinion of the Supreme Leader.

In 22 out of the 31 provinces, including Tehran, the reformist faction did not support any candidate. Another factor was that people still remember how in November 2019 protest demonstrations were crushed by the state. This had angered the people who were also dismayed at the accidental shooting of a Ukrainian passenger plane. Coronavirus may also have played a role in dissuading voters from coming out. Most of the neighbouring countries, including Pakistan have closed their borders with Iran. Some people had demanded that the elections be postponed and first the virus be tackled but the elections were held according to plan. The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has accused the Western media of raising false alarm about the coronavirus situation in Iran. He blamed the turnout on the negative propaganda by foreign powers. Many reformist leaders did not cast their vote. They included a former deputy interior minister, Mustafa Tajzade. However, former president Muhammad Khatami did

cast his ballot.

It is noteworthy that Khatami had supported the protests after the rigging allegations in the presidential elections of 2009. After that, Iranian media did not give any coverage to him and even his photos were not published.

But when he went to vote this time around, an official camera crew followed him. Former president, Ahmadinejad also cast his vote though many of his reformist friends were not allowed to contest elections.

A supporter of President Hassan Rouhani, Ali Motaheeri, also cast his vote despite himself being declared ineligible to contest because he was a staunch reformist. Ali Motaheeri has publicly said that he was informed by the authorities that he was being barred from election because he had disagreed with some of the edicts of the Supreme Leader.

It is worth mentioning that the losing candidate of the 2009 presidential election, Hossein Mosavi, has been under house arrest for over a decade now. So now, the conservatives had no strong competing candidates on 230 seats, and their win was as smooth as the Supreme Leader wanted it to be. In Tehran, the conservatives won all 30 seats. To win a seat from Tehran, the minimum requirement was a tally of at least 0.6m votes. A reformist candidate, Ali Reza Mahjub, who is also a trade union leader, could garner only 95,000 votes. The winning candidates —were all conservative or ultra-conservative. And now something coronavirus. According to international media, over 200 infected people had died by the first of March. The Iranian authorities confirmed only 50 deaths. Most of the victims died in Tehran where the number of infected people had crossed 400 in the first week of March.

After Tehran, the second most affected city is reported to be Qum where the number of coronavirus victims is reported to be 80. Among the top infected officials are Vice-President Masoumeh Ibtikar and Deputy Health Minister Eraj Hareerchi.

Some of the people travelling from Iran to Afghanistan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Pakistan, have been diagnosed with Covid 19, the disease resulting from coronavirus.



## Dealing with COVID-19 in Pakistan

DR ABID QAIYUM SULERI

The metaphor "black swan" was used in Roman literature to express impossibility as it was perceived that swans were always white. Black swans were discovered in Australia in 1697, and the metaphor remained in use to express an impossibility that was later disproven. The writer Nassim Taleb in 2007 used the phrase "black swan events" to describe events which were extremely rare, undirected, unpredictable and which would carry an extreme negative or positive impact.

The third characteristic of a black swan event, in Taleb's words, is that after the first recorded instance of the event, it is rationalized by hindsight, as if it could have been expected. Taleb regards almost all major scientific discoveries, historical events and artistic accomplishments as "black swans".

The spread of Covid-19 or the coronavirus is yet another black swan event. This rare virus turned into a pandemic within a few weeks of the first reported case in China. Here one may argue that China got caught flat-footed. However, the rest of the world — and especially the developed world — had time to prepare for this outbreak. Yet they failed to slow down the early spread of the disease which, left to itself, doubles every 5-6 days. Pakistan borders two of the initial hubs of the Corona outbreak, China and Iran. Its decision not to evacuate Pakistani students from China and let the Chinese medical system take care of them would have helped contain the spread of disease in its territories. However, the incidence of virus is reported in Pakistan and so far active tracking and screening for its presence is only confined to Pakistanis (and their close family members) returning from Iran — and that too was started when Iran became a known hub for the outbreak.

One may argue that the sample size of population screened for the coronavirus in a country of 220 million inhabitants is too little and there may be potentially more undetected cases which may multiply and appear in the next few weeks after their incubation period completes. Italy and Iran made the mistake of not enforcing an early policy of social distancing and by the time they acted, it was already too late. In that context, the recent measures by the government of Pakistan for social distancing including the closure of educational institutes; ban on public gatherings in cinemas, wedding halls, sports grounds, conferences; closing its western borders and diverting all international flights to only three airports should be helpful in containing the spread of the disease. However, these measures are not

enough to cope with the pandemic. A recent study of Covid-19 in China found that five percent of patients needed to be admitted to an intensive care unit (ICU), with many needing intensive ventilation or use of a more sophisticated machine that oxygenates blood externally. Italian hospitals offer world-class healthcare. Till last week, they were quite confident of coping with the disease. However, they underestimated the demand of ventilators and oxygen for the virus infected patients and that resulted in the highest number of fatalities by coronavirus outside China.

While one prays that there is no second wave of the virus outbreak in China, let us see what China has done so far to cope with Covid-19. It put its citizen under strict quarantine but ensured that no one was deprived of basic food commodities while in quarantine and off from work. It went for mass testing and screening. It did intensive contact tracing to disrupt the transmission chain and it provided ample human and financial resources for hospitals. Realizing that Covid-19 was not only a medical emergency, it also instructed the banks and revenue collecting agencies to go soft on their borrowers/clients.

Pakistan is neither an authoritarian nor a social welfare state. Hence, it cannot confine its citizens to their homes and provide them with free food and other utilities. This implies that strict precautionary quarantine would not work here. In the absence of "sick pay" for most of the employees and especially the self-employed, voluntary isolation of those with mild symptoms is not possible as they cannot miss their daily earnings. This is where federal and provincial governments will have to join heads and hands to devise a mechanism for providing relief to the lower income segment of society who may face further destitution as a result of social distancing and voluntary isolation. Screening of potential patients of Covid-19 at the mass level should be another priority to fight against this pandemic, especially when the outbreak is small and possible to contain. The government has announced a helpline—1166—where any suspected patient of virus may contact for screening and treatment. However, instead of waiting for patients to come forward for testing, health authorities need to be more proactive and do random screening at potential hotspots of this disease.

After identifying patients through screening, the next step would be to treat them. We have a limited number of hospitals in each province with isolation facilities and those hospitals too are understaffed and under-resourced. Here a supply-demand gap analysis, not only of human resources

but also of supplies such as externally-blood-oxygenating machines is crucial. Bridging the gap through diverting public funds, through engaging the private sector in a public-private partnership mode and inviting individual philanthropists for donation of hospital supplies and equipment would come handy. Remember, the well-resourced healthcare system of Italy failed to provide too many ventilators in too short a period of time. Hence, the aim here is not just to raise funds but to ensure that ventilators are available in isolation centres.

Going beyond the medical aspects, there is a valid demand for reduction in interest rate to increase our economic resilience in the context of the coronavirus. However, the bearish performance of stock markets in the UK, Europe and US implies that mere lowering of interest rates would not rescue economies. Businesses and employers would need temporary relief on tax and wage costs too. One may argue that Pakistan neither has the fiscal cushion to provide tax cuts and wage costs, nor a policy space to significantly reduce interest rate in an IMF programme.

However, these are unusual times. Pakistan should use this pandemic as force-majeure to revise its targets and get some fiscal cushion from the IMF. Multilateral lenders have established a special fund to cope with Covid-19. We should also approach the Fund to contain the transmission of this disease in Pakistan. At the external front, we need to keep in mind that the mere term 'pandemic' signifies its global nature. No single country/nation can deal with it in isolation. Countries need to work together on treatment protocols, what worked, what did not work (and why) to cope with Covid-19.

On the domestic front, facemasks and hand sanitizers have already vanished from markets. The PM's advisor on health also indicated possible shortages of food supplies in the weeks to come. To keep supplies normal, consumers would have to resist panic buying, while the governments (at all levels) would have to control hoarding of essential commodities. Smooth supplies of essential commodities would lessen the pain of troubled times. While hinting upon how to cope with black swan events, Taleb suggests that what may be a black swan surprise for a turkey is not a black swan surprise for its butcher; hence the objective should be to avoid being the turkey by identifying areas of vulnerabilities in order to "turn the black swans white". One needs to see how far and how quickly Pakistan can reduce its vulnerabilities to turn the black swan of the coronavirus into a white swan of safety.

## Reality and clarity

KATHLEEN WALLACE

The fragility of our American system is about to be laid bare. A foundation built on corporate welfare without any notion of a common welfare for the citizens can't withstand an onslaught of reality.

The corona virus has no interest in false economies or nonsensical patriotism. It can't tell if it's chomping into a billionaire or a homeless individual. It's egalitarian in that sense — of course the wealthy can somewhat mitigate their risks, but as the incoming reports of sports superstars as well as Hollywood elites testing positive for the virus shows, they are simply pending germ factories to hijack, just like the rest of us. Having no universal healthcare like other industrialized nations has been a moral lapse of incredible proportions. Trump certainly never advocated for such a thing and sadly Joe Biden says he will veto a bill for this should it land on his desk. This type of "choice" for voters doesn't allow for any ethical path. Accepting this sort of situation broadens over to an acceptance of all manner of sociopathic individualism. Selfishness may not be called out immediately; the adults in the room sneer at the impossibility of what other nations have been doing for decades, but ultimately something akin to karma seems to arise. The success of humans was dependent on collective survival practice — this moment in time when the sociopaths are in charge is an aberration. They have convinced most Americans that somehow this is normal — for us to not let someone ever get sick (try it at a fast food job — no pay, then no food, then no home...in short, you are not allowed to be sick).

This ludicrous situation is nothing but taking the human condition on as a commodity, wringing out the work, and allowing the hoarding of money for a minuscule top group of individuals. They could never in multiple lifetimes spend all that cash — all the while others can't even get sick. We are asking the poor to be superhuman to swell the belly of the elite. We don't have any notion of what is truly going on with the spread. Two strains? One much worse? There's evidently been no systematic testing to even reliably know mortality rates. Are many infected with mild symptoms? The information is just not there for us in any reliable manner. We have the strength of the internet to disseminate information, but how can anyone know what is correct in this environment?

Trump recently saying we'd be down to zero cases! How's that working out? How long before he has it at this rate? The indications that this thing would be dire came way back in January. I doubt the Chinese officials were welding doors to contain people in their apartments out of a love for welding. The videos were coming out many, many weeks ago. The time for preparation in the form of testing kit production was then. But we have a government that operates on holograms and empty rhetoric and a populace stunted in a daddy tell me what's going on phase of development. There is a potential at the end of all this for massive societal change. It's all going to be laid bare — the rot of corruption, the filth of allowing hoarder billionaires to flourish while people die needlessly. All of this could have been avoided.

Excerpted from: 'COVID-19 Side Effects: Reality and Clarity'.

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# Letters to the Editor

## Why divide Punjab only?

Why not other provinces too...and finally the federation of Pakistan. Once again PTI government has started playing the orchestra of a new province of South Punjab which will be carved out within Punjab by dividing it into two pieces. PPP which considers Sindh as Dharti Maan which can not be cut into two has no objection in slashing a part of Punjab which is Dharti Maan of 12 crore Punjabis. Punjab based PML N and PML Q are also on the same page with PTI and PPP. The demand for a separate province is a pure lingual demand in the guise of administrative reasons to benefit the already ruling elite of so called Saraiki wasaib. After the completion of motorways the excuse of long distances no longer exists. As for the meager allocation of funds for the southern part of Punjab, it is the responsibility of the present government whose head belongs to the so-called Saraiki Wasaib to satisfy the people of his region. Now we examine the lingual factor behind the demand for a separate province, which is much trumpeted in social media but less voiced in print media. Sindh ac-

commodates a considerable ratio of Urdu and (so-called) Saraiki speaking population besides Sindh which is the native language of Sindh. KPK boasts of two major languages Pashto and Hindko and innumerable small languages on its soil. Balochistan has passed a language bill aiming at the teaching of six languages including Punjabi in the province. BUT Punjab is the only monolingual and mono cultural federating unit of Pakistan and there is no justification to divide it into two or more provinces on lingual basis or under any pretext. 70 years past it's division on religious grounds for creation of a separate state for Muslims ensued the biggest holocaust in history. We Punjabi can not afford one more bloody line within Punjab. If Punjab is broken, fragmented or divided, the story will not end here, there would be much more left to be broken, fragmented and divided.

Tariq Mahmud LAHORE

## Current health crisis

There are many reasons for drug addiction but major among them is that it destroys fami-

lies. When a person starts taking drugs for any reason, he or she doesn't think about the consequences. The addiction starts with soft drugs like chhaliya, gutka and pan and then moves to hard drugs like opium, etc. There are specific agents or dealers inside and outside institutions, who encourage students to buy this 'curse.' Their contact details are easily exchanged from one person to another and one can easily meet them in hostels, hotels and other places which are generally hidden from the eyes of law enforcing agencies. The youngsters in Pakistan are mostly affected by drugs and alcohol. The number of addicts are on the rise at the rate of 40,000 per year making Pakistan one of the most affected countries in the world. The most disappointing fact is that many heroin addicts are below the age of 24. The growing use of drugs in educational institution is a serious threat to the lives of the students who are using drugs 'freely' and 'openly.'

According to a survey, one out of every 10 college/university students is a drug addict and almost 50 per cent students of elite schools and colleges based in Islamabad and Lahore are drug addicts. They have free access to drugs

and have no issue of affordability. The widespread availability of drugs is making the lives of youngsters lifeless and we need to curb this menace. Recently, the Supreme Court of Pakistan on hearing a suo motu case related to drug usage in private and government educational institutions rejected the report presented by the Lahore Police and ordered to launch an advertisement campaign on social media against drugs. The court directed the four provincial chief secretaries, the in-charge of the anti-narcotics division, and secretaries of other relevant ministries to devise an action plan to eradicate this disease from academic institutions. Similarly, the government has decided to launch a narcotics campaign in schools to make students aware about this abuse. The United Nations International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking held on June 26 every year introduced a theme of "Listen First" in 2018. The aim of the initiative was to make school children and youth aware about drug use and increase support for its prevention for the wellbeing of their families and communities. If you know anyone who is going through drug addiction, it is important to help them in the

best possible manner because most of the time, they cannot make a decision as drugs have ruined their minds. Being violent with them will only aggravate the situation. First of all patient, should be sent to rehab where qualified medical personnel can address their needs. One has to keep in mind that addiction is complicated but treatable and it will affect your brain and behavior. The treatment is long and critical but necessary for critical recovery.

The commonly known treatments are counselling and other behavioral therapies. Medication is also required to be taken during withdrawals. The treatment has to be planned according to the patient's need and must address mental disorders. Detoxification is the first stage of treatment and drugs taken during treatment should be monitored and reduced with the passage of time. After the treatment, it is the responsibility of teachers and parents to keep an eye on youngsters and don't let them think about the reasons which led them to drugs. Appreciate their recovery as an achievement and motivate them to think and act positive.

DUA SHEKH KARACHI