

REPRESENTATION: What is Their Mandate All About

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Democracy is all about representation. While the February 18 election has given an unambiguous verdict against the incumbents in government – except perhaps for the MQM in urban Sindh – do the election results tell us anything substantial about the representative character of political parties?

How national and federal is the political society in Pakistan today? This can be inferred from the vote-base of the main political parties. It is equally important to inquire which political parties represent which provincial, ethnic, linguistic and economic groups in the country. This is important because different regional and socio-economic groups tend to give different mandates and vary in their support for the mainstream political parties.

Table 1. Party Vote Shares by Province or Federal Territory
General Elections 2008, National Assembly Results

	ANP	MMA	MQM	PML(N)	PML(Q)	PPP	Others	Indep	Total Valid
Pakistan	2	2	8	20	23	31	4	11	100
Islamabad	0	1	0	45	19	30	1	5	100
Punjab	0	0	0	29	29	28	2	11	100
Sindh	0	1	30	2	12	43	9	3	100
Baluchistan	4	13	0	4	24	23	8	24	100
NWFP	16	13	0	14	15	19	6	15	100

Source: Dawn Election Cell data.

In most democracies a party would be classified as being “national” if it consistently won a large share of the national vote. By these standards there are at least three national parties in the 2008 elections: PPP, PMLQ and PMLN with 31, 23, and 20 percent of the national vote respectively (Table 1). But Pakistan is a federal democracy, alongside our definition of “national” we should also pay attention to a party’s presence across federating units. In principle it is possible for parties to be “national” and not “federal” and vice versa.

The data reveal that voters from all provinces don’t have an equal preference for the national parties. The combined vote share of the national political parties was extremely high in Punjab (86 percent) and Islamabad (94 percent) but merely 57 percent in Sindh, 48 percent in NWFP and 51 percent in Balochistan.

This suggests that outside the Punjab alternative visions of political society are successfully competing with those offered by the national political parties. As is well known, the competition to the main political parties in Sindh is coming from the MQM, in the NWFP from the ANP and the MMA, and in Balochistan from the MMA, regional parties (not obvious in the data because of their boycott) and independent candidates.

What is less appreciated, however, is that Balochistan and NWFP tend to reflect more fragmented polities than Punjab and Sindh: its votes are divided over many more parties as well as independent candidates. In Sindh the PPP, the MQM and the PMLQ between them controlled 85 percent of the vote base in 2008, which was similar to the combined vote share of the three national political parties in the Punjab. However, the three largest national assembly vote holding parties in the NWFP and Balochistan between them held no more than 50 percent and 60 percent of the national vote share, respectively. It is in these fragmented polities that religious parties and regionalists have performed the best.

Table 2. Distribution of Party Votes by Province or Federal Territory
General Elections 2008, National Assembly Results

	ANP	MMA	MQM	PMLN	PMLQ	PPP	Others	Ind	% Valid Votes in Pakistan
Islamabad	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	1
Punjab	0	4	1	89	76	55	25	64	60
Sindh	6	9	99	2	13	35	52	6	25
Balochistan	8	25	0	1	4	3	7	9	4
NWFP	85	61	0	7	6	6	15	14	10
Total Party Votes	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Dawn Election Cell data.

To see if a party is “federal” we need to know how widely its national vote is distributed across federating units. A party can be classified as being overrepresented in a province if its share of the vote coming from any particular province is much higher than overall share of that province’s voters in the national total. Conversely, if a party’s share in a particular province is much lower than that province’s share in the national total we can say that it is underrepresented in that province. For 2008 the PPP and the establishment-backed PMLQ can claim federal representation because they have decent representation in all four provinces. Despite this, however, the PPP is overrepresented in Sindh (35 per cent of its national vote came from that province compared to Sindh’s 25 share of the total national vote) and the PMLQ in Punjab (76 per cent of its vote was in Punjab compared with Punjab’s 60 per cent share of the total national vote). Correspondingly, the PMLQ is underrepresented in Sindh. At the other extreme is the MQM, which is really a one province party with hardly any vote base outside Sindh.

The third national party PMLN, in 2008, comes out as a two-province party in terms of representation as do the MMA and the ANP. It is heavily overrepresented in the Punjab, with 89 percent of its votes coming from this province compared to 60 percent of the national valid vote coming from the province. It is only slightly underrepresented in NWFP.

Given its vote base, issues that have gained wider currency in the Punjab and NWFP are likely to matter more to PMLN. Therefore, the restoration of the judiciary is bound to be at the top of its agenda given the much higher levels of radicalisation of the Bars in

Punjab and NWFP. However, because of its dependence on the Punjab vote the PMLN has received a weaker mandate for issues such as provincial autonomy. The overall “Muslim League” vote – taken as a combination of PMLN and PMLQ – is more evenly spread across the provinces. If, as some believe, this vote gets consolidated again into a unified “Muslim League” there would be a second party besides the PPP with a solid national presence.

The ANP and MMA are also two-province parties that are overrepresented in NWFP and Balochistan. However, both parties are seriously underrepresented in the two larger provinces. Intriguingly, the MMA’s vote base in 2008 is similar to that of the ANP, which for all purposes is a regional rather than a national vote base. It appears that the ANP and MMA are providing competing visions for the political societies of the two smaller provinces. Given its current vote base, issues of provincial autonomy are going to be at the top of the ANP agenda as is the ‘war on terror’.

It is well recognised that in 2008 the voters of Pakistan have given a divided mandate for the National and for each of the provincial assemblies. With this mandate no government, barring Sindh, can be formed without a coalition. While negotiating to form a coalition at the federal level the PPP, PMLN and ANP would do well to understand the differing vote bases of each party. They should recognise that the mandate is not only divided across these parties but that it is also multifaceted because the different vote bases of these parties have different concerns, issues and aspirations.

For instance, matters of regional underdevelopment may not have the same resonance among the voters of central and northern Punjab as they would for the voters of Sindh, Balochistan and NWFP. Likewise, the issue of the restoration of the judiciary may not have the same resonance in Balochistan and Sindh. If this coalition is to materialise and survive then each party would do well to substantively accommodate the aspirations of the vote bases of the others.

After all, ultimately electoral politics are about the representation and balance between different interest groups and segments of the polity. This implies active coordination and negotiation between provinces in order to develop federal democratic politics. This can occur through the internalisation of provincial differences within a party — as in the case of the PPP and possibly a combined Muslim League of the future. Alternatively, federal democracy can develop through greater cooperation between parties that have representation in different provinces. For now it seems that the divided mandate favours a combination of the two processes: internalisation of federal politics within parties, as well as cooperation between different regional parties.

Two things are quite clear. One, no single party can rightly claim, on its own, to represent all federal units. Two, parties have overlapping interests and positions across a range of issues which means that negotiations between them need not be limited to specific bilateral matters – it is both possible and necessary to arrive at understandings and agreements across a range of issues.

The PPP and PMLN will benefit from cooperating with each other not only for the restoration of the supremacy of the parliament, but also because it will allow them to form stable governments in the centre and Punjab respectively. They also have reasons to cooperate on upcoming sensitive issues such as a new National Finance Commission, and a population census scheduled for 2008. On the “war against terror” the PPP and the PMLN appear to have different approaches.

But then there is another set of parties that have received popular mandate – ANP and MQM – whose approach is likely to be closer to that of the PPP. Despite the history of cooperation between ANP and PMLN and the good inter-personal relations between their respective leaders, the two parties are poles apart on the “war against terror” and on the Pashtun identity of the NWFP. If the PPP arrives at a power-sharing arrangement with the PMLN in Punjab and the centre, however, it will have an interest to act as a bridge between the respective positions of the ANP and the PMLN on the two potentially contentious issues. Conversely, the ANP would have an interest in the PMLN being involved in a partnership with the PPP in order to reduce the latter’s dominating position in any coalition.

Another case is the relationship between the PMLN and the MQM. Following the May 12 events there was an escalation of rhetoric between the two parties – with menacing ethnic undertones at times. The PPP will have an interest in this case too, to act as a bridge between the two parties, given that it will require good working relations with each of them in order to ensure stable government in the centre and Sindh respectively. The post-election pronouncements of the PPP leadership about evolving consensus are consistent with the arithmetic that has been thrown up in the provinces and the centre.

These federal and national electoral arithmetic imply that the stability of next parliament faces serious tests but also that there is great potential for inter-provincial and inter-party cooperation on important issues that matter to the electorate.