Elections: Pakistan 2013 to India 2014

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In this essay, we analyze the results of the recently concluded elections in Pakistan through the prism of voting patterns of four non-overlapping social categories. Positing that these categories extend to contemporary India, offers us an insight into their likely voting behavior in the Indian elections scheduled for 2014.

For the psephological analysis below, we divide the voting population in Pakistan and India into four mutually exclusive groups denoted by L1, L2, L3 and L4, respectively. L1 represents the traditionally rich elite, whose prior economic standing and social connections enabled them to gain enormously from the economic boom of the post-90s period. Unlike in other democracies, this is the only group that can stand for public office in the Indian subcontinent. The educational background of members of this group is almost never from engineering; they draw upon the liberal arts and humanities. Socially liberal in their private lives, they span politically both the liberal and conservative ends of the spectrum. A preponderant majority of English-language newspaper columnists tend to be drawn from the liberal L1 category. Western perception of Pakistan and India, it follows, is influenced considerably by direct or indirect interaction of western analysts with L1 members. L1 members are caricatured by middle classes as being 'immoral'. In popular middle class imagination, a female L1 member brings upon - incorrectly, one may add - an image of a Page-three socialite involved in the fashion industry. While being numerically insignificant, their influence on politics stems from their exclusive hold over participating in elections, as well as their control over mass media communications.

L2 represents a new professional class that has risen through the cracks of poverty by taking advantages of opportunities afforded over the 1990-2005 period. These are often highly educated with backgrounds in engineering, medicine, and the pure sciences. Their prosperity - of recent origin - has not yet blinded them to the realities of classes underneath them. Their economic standing does not allow money to work by itself for them, but still avails them enough time and opportunity to ponder about questions of broader national/societal concern. Their self-
perception of themselves as custodians of national interest and patriotism tends to make them lean towards right-conservative causes. While not being amoral, they show much less concern than the liberal L1-elite about abstract notions like democracy, minority concerns and human rights. Typically bi-lingual in English and their native tongues, they get vociferous support from non-resident communities outside the subcontinent.

L3 are the putative socially-conservative middle classes. Some members are part of the petit bourgeoisie and earn more than professional workers in L2; but for the most part, L3 members are involved in blue-collar or entry-level white-collar jobs earning considerably less than L2 workers. They, as of now, have limited or no internet access and tend to be more accepting of their inferior place in society. While not being unaware of the chicanery of the ruling elite, their minds are still heavily influenced by official propaganda. Unlike L2, who have been exposed to other societies through either their personal investigation of history or travel in foreign lands, L3 members have never seen an alternative to the status quo in their nations. In the morass of the past few years, the economic position of L3 members has been rendered highly unstable. A single catastrophic incident typically can push them towards poverty. This risk factor prevents this group from taking an active interest in politics or geopolitical concerns.

L4 are the sod of the earth. Illiterate or barely literate, they do not exist in the consciousness of the other groups by virtue of their complete absence from subcontinental mass media. For a western analyst, their presence is discerned only from statistics on per capita income in these countries besides their impact on elections. L4 tend to be religious, but pressing economic concerns have forced a mutation of traditional religion to suit practical concerns. For example, women involved in agriculture attire themselves in a manner that the better-off L3 would deem scandalous. With little exposure to modernist thought, this class 'votes its caste, instead of casting its vote'. Basal concerns of religion, language, and caste have a high appeal. This group is targeted by politicians by naming schemes after leaders in their respective parties - the best example of which is provided by the multitude of Nehru-Gandhi schemes in India.

Having delineated the four categories, we can analyze their voting proclivities below. The liberal L1-elite in Pakistan and India tends to support Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Indian National Congress (Congress), respectively. A charitable explanation for this support would quote an old connection to leftist politics practiced by these parties in the 70s. (The more radical alternative of voting for the communist parties is unavailable in Pakistan and meaningful only in some regions within India.) A less favorable view would accuse the liberal L1-elite of confusing the patronage politics played by these populist parties with genuine reform aimed at helping the poor. The liberal L1-elite – in contrast with L2 members – tends to worry disproportionately more about religious fundamentalism in society than about corruption in public life.

L2 members liberated in social discourse through the anarchic medium of internet have emerged as a political force only in the past ten years. A new situation has come about where in their voices cannot be easily censored and while they can amplify their claims as much as the elite traditionally did. Unfazed by the Harvard/Yale/Oxford tags bandied about by the elite, these newly rich groups see through the chicanery of the L1 claims. They are eager to see their individual rise being mirrored in the larger society and state. While they see the
current state as an obstacle, they - in contrast to similarly-placed groups in the US - believe in the power of the state to effect change. These members by virtue of suffering through a corrupt government setup feel strongly about it. A lack of experience with established institutions of governance makes them susceptible to messianic claims of a single individual being able to reform and rework society in a positive direction. L2 members are often accused by L1 commentators of holding contradictory notions about society for their curious blend of old and modern viewpoints about societal and political developments. L2 members are monopolized currently in their voting preferences. In Pakistan, they have supported Imran Khan, and in India, their vote stands solidly behind Narendra Modi.

L1 elite tend to exaggerate the power of this L2 group. While vociferous in online portals, L2 groups lack the money power of L1 members and the numerical strength of L3/L4 and as such, it is this weakness on the ground, which makes L2 members pugnacious arm-chair warriors. Lest we overstate the L2 weakness, it should be noted that economic liberalization has steadily increased their numbers. In the current Pakistani elections, while L2 voting could not translate into seats, they have projected Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) as a significant national competitor to the established parties. A similar trend can be expected in India next year, where a Modi victory cannot be guaranteed merely on basis of strong L2 loyalty to his brand.

Unlike the L2 vote, the L3 vote is split amongst multiple players. In urban India in the last election, this vote went to the Congress aided greatly by the clean image conjured by it for the incumbent prime minister. In other regions, the so-called bania vote was cornered by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In Pakistan, the L3 vote in Punjab has gone to Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) traditionally and there is no change in it. Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) has a loyal L3 vote-bank based on ethnicity, which has garnered it steady electoral returns over the years. Many of the caste-based groups in India target this sector - like the Vanniyars by Paattali Makkal Katchi, Vokkaligas by Janata Dal-Secular and Yadavs by Rashtriya Janata Dal/Samajwadi Party.

The L3 segment is influenced by its consumption of media content controlled by L1. In India, where the penetration of English-language media is more prominent than in Pakistan, this gives a head-start to Congress over other rivals. In the coming elections, it is in this segment where the Other Backward Caste background of Modi would yield rewards for the BJP.

The L4 vote bank has little time or appetite for analysis of the political situation around them. Swayed by schemes named after the Bhuttos or the Nehru-Gandhis, they have voted for leaders whom they believe to have martyred themselves for the poor. The L4 vote in Sindh has been a traditional bastion for PPP and there has been no change in it. In India, the L4 vote traditionally went to the Congress (recall the Kshatriya-Harijan-Adivasi-Muslim combination in Gujarat); in the past two decades, work done by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh groups has created support for BJP in certain quarters.

The rise of PTI portends an increased role for L2 in future subcontinental elections. The clear victory of PML-N, however, serves to reiterate the fact that on-the-ground networks and careful constituency-level coalition stitching shall remain the dominant paradigm for victory in subcontinental elections at least for a few more years. The online tsunami created by L2 members in Pakistan attracted a lot of analysis by the L1 elite; a phenomenon that is currently being mimicked in India for Narendra Modi. Unless Modi is able to break through the L1
stranglehold on mainstream media, it is unclear how his campaign can succeed over L3 and L4 voters across India, many of whom have had no chance to view personally the progress in Gujarat over the past decade.

The loss of PPP reminds us again that pontificating about secularism, democracy and minority rights might attract resource grants and trips to western institutions, but do not matter to the general population. In contrast, an alliance with Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat seems to have helped rather than retard the progress of PML-N in the current elections. In India, the situation is slightly different. At 15% of population, the Muslims function as India’s largest caste group given their mobilization through the religion-in-danger slogan. Given the successful demonization campaign against Modi by the liberal L1-elite in India, the mere possibility of Modi emerging as a BJP PM would push the entire Muslim vote towards so-called secular parties in India. Viewed in this perspective, harping on ‘secularism’ would lead to rich electoral rewards for the Congress in the coming Indian elections.

There were certain other facets to this election that remains to be explained. The Pakistani elections witnessed a high turnout - and yet the favored L2 candidate has not emerged victorious. It is unclear if the turnout was caused by a renewed enthusiasm within L2 ranks for democratic processes or if a larger L3 mobilization happened for centre-right wing forces. It is also intriguing to note that the sympathy factor - from Imran Khan’s fall for PTI and Ali Haider Gilani’s abduction for PPP - could not prevent the PML-N juggernaut. A declining nostalgia for the Bhutto family could limit the PPP within Sindh, unless it is able to rework its narrative. This trend has implications for India as well, where the Congress and other players - like Jagan Mohan Reddy - could expect a declining reward from their martyrdom politics.

Finally, we note that not all developments are explainable by the discourse provided above. It is hard, for example, to explain the PTI sweep of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or to explain Imran Khan’s victory over the hunting-with-Taliban running-with-ANP Ghulam Bilour. Further, there are certain differences between the Pakistani and Indian society. Firstly, that which would be castigated as right-wing extremist in India passes off as liberal or centre-left in Pakistan. Secondly, Pakistan has a higher percentage of population living in urban agglomerations than India. Thirdly, Pakistani middle-classes tend to be politically aware because of incessant news reporting from their many channels as compared to the generally apathetic L3 in India. One will have to account for these differences if we were to extrapolate recent results in the Pakistani elections to conjecture on the elections in India next year.

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**Tags:**
- PPP [2]
- Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) [3]
- PML-N [4]

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