

Rock the vote

A hundred beats

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The writer and political philosopher Henry David Thoreau once said 'don't vote – it only encourages them'. Given the usual suspects in Pakistani politics today, it's easy to agree with Thoreau. Elections in this country have been an exercise in mass futility, serving only to elect and re-elect politicians who tirelessly uphold the status quo. They come into government with grandiose promises of espousing democracy, fighting poverty, and combating illiteracy and yet all that seems to be actively enhanced are their foreign bank accounts. Politics is a dirty game, made increasingly dirtier by crummy politicians who see politics only as a means of furthering personal ambition. The richest of the rich stand from the poorest of poor constituencies and spend their time in office as reverse Robin Hoods: stealing from the poor to give to the rich.

However, election time is upon us again. The usual suspects argue that under emergency rule elections cannot be free or fair. They seem to forget that prior to the emergency we were living under a well-settled dictatorship: free and fair was never meant to be part of the equation. But nevertheless we Pakistanis have been given an opportunity, however skewed, to raise our voices.

In forty-four days we go to the polls. We have a choice here. Either we sit back, do nothing, and allow the usual suspects -- puppeticians we should call them, they are a delightful mix of puppet politicians -- to steal our votes. Or we get proactive, we demand our stake in the political process and we do our part to foment the seedlings of a participatory democracy.

Thoreau might have said 'don't vote' but he also said 'what old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new'. Let's boot out the old guard and clear the field for new voices to step forward.

Allow me to offer some humble advice -- a guide to rocking the vote, if you will. And for your added comfort, you should know that I'm not running for elections. But I will be voting.

Let's start at the beginning.

1. Tips for spotting sleazy candidates: Most puppeticians sound like used car salesmen. They're slick and disingenuous and are out to fleece you. Watch out for superlatives and definitives, example: 'I am the only person to eradicate poverty/create democracy/make peace with India'. Politics is about encouraging a cooperative, where people work together with their representatives to push for social and political change. It's not a one-man/one-woman show.

Puppeticians talk at you, not with you. A politician's job is to listen to the people they seek to serve and to take their needs and desires forward, their job is not to tell you what they want. That's irrelevant. It's about what you, the voter, wants.

If they have their faces on buses or television adds, they're spending too much money. Which leads to the inevitable, where did they get their campaign finances? The same goes for gargantuan billboards over office buildings and shopping centres. Always follow the money; ethics are noticeably absent from puppeticians.

2. A guide to rigging: Rigging is a celebrated component of elections in Pakistan. It is nothing to be ashamed of, rather it's an awfully creative field that way too many excel in. The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) recently ruled that women in face obscuring burqas no longer need to remove said burqas to take their ID card pictures. This obviously complicates matters. There is no way of identifying voters if you cannot see their faces. The fact that some adventurous NADRA employees were caught forging ID cards a short while ago doesn't comfort me either. It works like this: women are often used to cast multiple votes because they can take cover under burqas. They come in, cast a vote, walk out, take a new ID card, walk back in and cast another vote. Repeat ad nauseum.

Ultimately rigging is so successful and seamless because people are complacent. We know bad things are happening, but what can we do besides stay home and complain incessantly about it? Sorry to break it to you, but complaining is not an art form; it's not constructive, it's perfectly useless.

3. How to do your part in making the elections as free and as fair as possible: Sign up to be a polling agent. You have to be over the age of 18 and be registered to vote. Find a candidate who you believe in (not one who pays you/ promises you a job/ insists you will be made a member of their cabinet -- that's a puppetician. Avoid at all costs). Find someone who represents you and your needs, someone who is ethically and morally as well as politically worthy of your trust, and then volunteer to be one of their polling agents -- the job is simple yet so important. You will have to oversee the voting process, take down voter numbers and watch over the ballots to make sure no monkey business is going on. As a polling agent you can contest votes that are illegally cast -- you can stop rigging in your polling station.

Don't let seats go uncontested. The problem with politics in this country -- one of the many - is that the field needs to open up. We need local activists to stand against the planted, flown in variety of politicians. Only you can speak for what your community needs. Someone who doesn't live or work among the people they represent isn't invested in the dynamics of the area.

The collective action problem is a dangerous one -- I won't stand because someone else will. No, they won't. You have to do it or be willing to surrender your constituency to someone who doesn't embody the needs of your people.

Vote. If you aren't registered already, it's too late and you've lost your chance to influence the politics of the future. If you are, however, then you must avail of your right to participate. If you're a registered voter and you decide to sleep in or laze about on Election Day, your vote will

be used, just not by you. It will be stolen and the riggers who can bank on your continued complacency will cast it.

So vote, but vote thoughtfully. Don't vote on personality, don't vote based on who your friends/employers/family are voting for. Don't vote for a candidate simply because you always voted for them in the past. Don't vote for lotas, they have a grand total of zero principles. Don't vote for puppeticians -- it only encourages them. Research your candidates and their platforms thoroughly. Go listen to them speak. Ask questions.

If you don't, you'll only have yourself to blame on January 8. Pakistan has had enough betrayal at the polls. We've contended with too many corrupt and ineffectual politicians and we need to stop giving them more chances. They have failed and consistently and dangerously so. We need to breathe new life into the polls and we need to take a stand once and for all. We have to vote for change, radical change.