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## THOUGHT PIECE

# Navigating Political Anxiety through Gendered Interventions

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By

**Ahmed Bilal Mehboob**

President, Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT)

Political uncertainty, in many ways, is a self-prescribed way of life for almost all democratic societies. Every few years, democratic countries go through the exercise of electing new political leadership which brings with it, or at least should bring with it, new ideas, programmes, experts, advisors, leaders and styles of leadership and governance.

Although modern politics does not leave everything up to surprise, and political parties and leadership are expected to share their election manifestoes and introduce their teams to voters ahead of the election, there is a lot which is experienced only when the new teams are voted to power. We have seen parties who had extremely impressive manifestoes and claimed to have solutions to all problems, but they failed to deliver when voted into power because, even by their own admission, they had a poor understanding of the state of the country's affairs.

By consciously deciding to periodically seek new leadership or renew their mandate in some cases, democracies

have built a certain degree of uncertainty into their political systems and for good reason. In healthy democracies, despite the advances made in the opinion surveys, the greatest uncertainty is around who will get elected and with what strength of public mandate.

This uncertainty is experienced at each strata of the state: national, sub-national and local. Since change in leadership at each level generally does not take place at one time, there is a cycle of uncertainty going on almost all the time.

As the time of change or election draws near, the intensity of the uncertainty and many cases, anxiety, correspondingly increases. This is a natural phenomenon and people generally adjust well to these recurring periods of uncertainty. The political uncertainty should, therefore, not be a very big deal in normal circumstances. But these are not normal times in Pakistan. With the National Assembly entering its 5th and last parliamentary year in August 2022, we are well into the election year.

Confrontational politics is not new in



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Pakistan and we have seen extreme polarization between the top contenders for power in past three decades. Since 2013, these contenders may have changed but the polarization has returned with a vengeance.

With the huge advances made in communication and information technology, the task of making and unmaking narratives has become more dependent on communication technologists. Some political parties that have mastered these techniques much better and therefore have significant advantage over others, have popularized the narrative of uncertainty. The normal and expected political uncertainty is being portrayed as something akin to a huge crisis which needs to be urgently resolved only through immediate election. Greater public worry means stronger support to this narrative.

Vulnerable segments of society usually have a weaker shock-absorbing capacity and therefore are more apprehensive of uncertainties. Women are one such group in our society who have much less control over their lives. They have poor access to life-changing experiences such as education, travel, or exposure to international developments, and therefore feel much more threatened by perceived or real uncertainty. Women in this part of the world, in general, lack the opportunities to face uncertain conditions. It is, therefore, correct that political uncertainty, real or perceived, causes greater anxiety and sense of distress among women.

Education and skill training are some of the best tools to build the capacity and self-confidence of women. In recent years, women have made great strides

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in access to higher education based on pure merit. The female access to education at primary, intermediate and secondary level is still a problem. A policy intervention is needed to incentivize parents to send their daughters to schools. Girls' primary and secondary schools need to be in each village and neighbourhood so that girls do not have to travel outside for schooling. This is because travel over a distance always discriminates against young girls. In the same vein, policies need to be devised to make it easy for girls to take up IT skills. This will help women become financially independent too.

At the same time, the challenge of extremism will have to be strictly

checked. The recent denial of education opportunities to women in Afghanistan should serve as a wake-up call for Pakistani policy makers and rulers.

Policies to incentivize political parties to award more tickets to women in local, provincial and national elections must be adopted. More orientation and briefing courses should be arranged for prospective women politicians. A Women Political School existed in Pakistan some years ago. It is important to revive such schools in the federal and provincial capitals. Ultimately, the country must work towards interventions that enhance women's abilities to both understand and better mediate political uncertainties.



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