



ELECTION COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN

Islamabad, the 27th December, 2023

REBUTTAL

This is with reference to the article published in daily newspaper Dawn dated 26th December, 2023 by Mr. Kalbe Ali with heading “ECP falls behind other in digitization race”.

The said article depicts imprudent details and far away from the truth and reality. The facts are actually the other way around and given below;

The Election Commission of Pakistan stands pioneer which has launched its voters’ data digitally on SMS 8300 for public convenience and it is also called “Digital Parchee” that was globally recognized and acknowledged (source: www.ecp.gov.pk). The International Centre for Parliamentary Studies (ICPS), London based international organization honored ECP with two International Awards named as, “Use of Innovative Technology Award” and “Accessibility Award” on 8300 SMS Service in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in an International Conference on Elections (source: www.parlicentre.org).

Similarly, the Commonwealth organization in its Report “Cybersecurity for Elections” published in March, 2020 also acknowledged and appreciated Pakistan’s 8300 SMS (Source: www.thecommonwealth.org). This award winning digital remarkable service encompasses to accessible for all 190 million mobile customers of the country for checking voting details of 128.5 million voters’ data through 8300 SMS 24/7 using his/her mobile. It is not restricted to any religion, sect, gender or particular community. It facilitates general public to see voting details using latest SMS service available 24/7/365. It also prevents from all types of cyberattacks and its misuse that is why 8300 SMS is unhackable as it is only available from territorial boundaries of the country.

This technology is accessible to all stakeholders keeping the International standards of data security of digital voters’ data and privacy of individual voters’. It is vital to draw attention of the public that putting voters list on any website neither internationally recommended nor technically secure. Websites are prone to hack and no one can claim its ultimate security, so it is in national interest not to put voters’ list on any website. Therefore, putting this vital information on website or any mobile App (IP based network) is strictly not recommended because it tantamount the violation of Section-195 of the Elections Act, 2017. Attention is drawn towards Section-195 of the Elections Act, 2017 that also depicts the protection of digital electoral rolls data.

The Section 79(3) of the Election Act, 2017 is very clear that says, contesting candidates can get softcopy of the electoral rolls in digital form (pdf over USB) of his constituency and this practice was used in previous General Elections but it never allows to put all the voters list on website. Therefore, ECP always comply legal course of action by sharing softcopy of the voters' list as per demand on application under Section 79(3) of the Elections Act 2017.

ECP is technology progressive organization and has accomplished more than two dozen technological initiatives since year 2020 to date and details are referred to ECP's website for more information that are available to public.

The decision not to publish the voters' list on website or mobile apps, as emphasized by the ECP, is rooted in the commitment to international standards of data security and individual privacy, as well as compliance with Section 195 of the Elections Act, 2017.

Real-world examples of website hacking, such as incidents during the United States Presidential election¹ in 2016 and subsequent election events in French² election and German³ parliamentary election underscore the vulnerability of online platforms to cyber threats. The cautious approach of the ECP aligns with latest global best practices, preserving public trust in the integrity of electoral systems. Contrary to the story published, multi-million-dollar budget are actually required for web security to protect website from hackers;

[Source(1): December 2016, www.nytimes.com]

[Source(2): April, 2017, www.politico.eu]

[Source(3): September, 2017, www.cybersecurityintelligence.com]

In conclusion, the ECP urges media to adhere to the golden principles of journalism emphasizing the importance of fact-checking and seeking input from reliable sources before publishing articles. Accuracy and unbiased reporting are paramount for the benefit of the public.