

Report: Roundtable on “Indian General Election” with H.E. Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan, the High Commissioner of India to Pakistan on April 22, 2014.

## **The scale of Indian General Election is enormous**

**Aarish U. Khan**

ISLAMABAD: “The scale of General Election process in India—involving over 800 million voters—is enormous requiring huge administrative arrangements,” said Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan, the High Commissioner of India to Pakistan. He was speaking at a roundtable organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) here on Tuesday. Dr. Raghavan said that more than one million administrative personnel take part in the election process in India. He added that, with an experience of conducting 15 General Elections and almost 400 State Assembly elections, the Election Commission in India was up to the task. Dr. Raghavan shared that the Election Commission was making full use of modern technology in the current General Elections, adding that all voting was taking place with the help of automated electronic machines that would make the counting of votes very easy once the voting process would complete.

Dr. Raghavan shared that all the regulatory frameworks were in place for the elections like photo-ID verification etc. He emphasized that the election process in India had come a long way since its inception all the way from multiple ballots and ballot-boxes to machine-assisted voting. He revealed that the 2014 general election had also brought about two important changes: one, a section for third gender has been included in the voter list; and two, a no option has also been included on the ballot paper in case a voter wants to exercise his or her right to vote but wants to reject all the candidates in the race.

Dr. Raghavan was of the view that the enormity of the scale of the election process and the electorate itself in India made it very difficult for single issue political parties to win elections. He shared that there are around 1,600 registered political parties in India but only between 200 and 300 actually participate in the general elections because of the enormity of the size of the country and its electorate. He was of the view that economic growth and governance were important concerns for Indian voter. Dr. Raghavan added that social media had become an important element on the Indian sociopolitical scene.

Commenting on the impact of the outcome of election on India-Pakistan relations, Dr. Raghavan maintained that it would have little impact on the relations, since the general policies would continue. He opined that although the Bahartiya Janata Party (BJP) might have more robust views on the issue of terrorism because of the generational change it has gone through, it would all boil down to what sort of developments are taking place between the two countries at the bilateral level on the issue at the time and before that. He cautioned that although the Indian government would want to show restraint in the event of another major terrorist attack in India linked to Pakistan, it would be under very strong pressure of the public opinion at home. He was of the view that on the issue of terrorism, the ball is in Pakistan’s court. “Steps need to be taken to build trust on the issue of terrorism now, and Pakistan has to take those steps,” said Dr. Raghavan.

Responding to questions about outstanding disputes between Pakistan and India, Dr. Raghavan maintained that Siachen and Sir Creek were not easily resolvable issues as it was perceived in

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Pakistan. On the contrary, he argued that trade and people-to-people contacts were more easily resolvable than these issues but even progress on those was stunted. He said that Pakistan got at least 17 years of Indian Prime Ministers who had an intuitive desire to normalize relations with Pakistan, but that Pakistan could not benefit from it. He said that improvement in Pakistan-India relations could be attributed, in part, to the advancements in communication technologies. He said that the people of Pakistan and India get a greater chance to interact with each other, thanks to the modern information technology tools, which was decreasing distances between them. Dr. Raghavan negated the notion that media in India was more hostile toward Pakistan than the Pakistani media toward India.

Dr. Raghavan denied Pakistani allegations against India over the violation of Indus Water Treaty. “Indians are not saying that they are violating the treaty and that they don’t care about it. They say that they are not violating the treaty, and it needs to be ascertained before making any allegations,” said Dr. Raghavan. He added that the demand of the time was that the two countries went a step further in water management and talked to each other about irrigation methods, managing watersheds etc. for improved utilization of the resource.

The roundtable was also attended by Amb. Arif Ayub, President of IRS; Brig (Retd.) Bashir Ahmed, Senior Fellow IRS; Amb. Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, and Amb. Aziz Ahmed Khan. Other IRS scholars who attended the roundtable included: Mr. Aarish Khan, Ms. Heba al Adawy, Mr. Imran Sardar, Ms. Sidra Tariq, Ms. Humera Iqbal, and Mr. Yasir Masood.