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## Uncomfortable questions for Pakistan's future rulers



These days, all of Pakistan is engaged in a debate over the questions which Returning Officers (mostly drawn from the lower judiciary) have asked the candidates of the May 11 elections about their personal lives. These questions were posed during the scrutiny process of their nomination papers.

Though personal questions by Returning Officers (ROs) to candidates is nothing new, social and mainstream media are full of criticism of the Returning Officers and the Articles 62 and 63 of Pakistan's Constitution under which such questions are asked. These articles require that all candidates must be honest, trustworthy and practicing Muslims. In short, they should be "Sadiq" and "Ameen."

In a strongly worded response, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan termed it an attempt to impose a clergy on the country, and a farce in the name of scrutiny which amounts to engaging people in irrelevant and useless matters. However, a timely intervention by the Lahore High Court, an apex court of the largest province, Punjab, ordered the ROs to refrain from asking questions about the personal lives of candidates since it amounted a mockery of the institution of the judiciary.

With the alleged nefarious questions, the process of ensuring across the board scrutiny of candidates who intend to compete in the upcoming elections has been reduced to a laughing stock. To me, things would have looked more serious and sober provided this "thorough scrutiny" be performed by a higher forum other than the district level judicature which is allegedly notorious for mocking the justice system through their delayed decisions and rampant corruption.

### Too personal to ask

The variety of questions the ROs asked the candidates, as appeared in electronic and print media, included some very personal ones. Examples include questions about the number of their wives they have and how do they ensure justice among them if they have more than one, or if they believe in honey moons, or if they have ever waited outside a girls' college. Some were asked as to when bathing becomes obligatory on Muslim men, or if they were circumcised properly or if they have ever seen an uncensored movie, or ever eaten pork.

One candidate was asked a multiple choice question positing that if his wife, son and a noted religious scholar were drowning in a river, whom would he rescue first. One woman candidate was asked if winning the elections would affect the lives of her husband and children. Apart from these embarrassing questions, the candidates were asked usual questions, asking them to recite six Kalmahs, Surahs from Holy Quran, the national anthem, the number of Rakaats in daily prayers etc.

Some critics, airing their views on social media, feel the ROs received undue encouragement by the observation of the Chief justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. He said only such representatives should be elected whom had never been disqualified. Lahore High Court, in its order, stated that the scrutiny process was carried out against the spirit of the Chief Justice's observation.

Former interior minister, Rehman Malik, known for relentlessly lying before the courts about his dual nationality throughout his five-year tenure, made an interesting comment from London, to where he returned after the government came to an end. He said only those are Sadiq and Ameen in Pakistan whose names are Sadiq and Ameen.

The fresh breed of critics of Articles 62 and 63 questioned their place in the constitution, saying these provisions tend to make the country a clergy state. But the supporters said the country was established for practicing Islam, this warrants that its future rulers should be righteous and upright. "Besides, proper scrutiny is made even when household servants are hired for petty salaries. So why not uphold the strictest scrutiny for those who are to be entrusted with the entire national wealth and future," they plead.

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