

# EVMs in 2023

*Idrees Khawaja*

THE approach adopted by analysts and others for making a case against the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) is like someone saying in the early part of the last century that the Wright brothers would first invent the aircraft, it would fall to the ground after a brief flight, and then after modifications, tests, and trials, the aircraft would evolve to its present-day form of passenger or fighter aircraft. Hundreds of products, including cars, mobile phones, etc being manufactured in Pakistan today did not go through such a cycle — the lessons from the experiences of others were used to shorten the cycle significantly.

Learning from others who have successfully used EVMs, we can find solutions to challenges such as potential hacking of EVMs, their transportation to polling booths, ensuring the dust-free environment they need, etc — after all, we do not expect EVMs in the US and India to be hacked or corrupted by dust and humidity.

Let us procure the EVMs like others have done and let our relevant experts tear apart these machines to find what is inside and how it works, and then manufacture similar ones in the country. Nothing stops the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) from establishing and owning a facility for EVM manufacturing, and staffing it with those it can trust. If we can find the people and the will to develop sound mechanisms for building nuclear bombs, and printing currency notes and ballot papers in a secure environment, then we can certainly have these ‘not-to-be-compromised’ mechanisms for EVMs too.

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ECP ownership of the entire chain that would manufacture the EVMs would solve many issues — EVM software being installed by ECP employees themselves can counter the argument that the software is unobservable, that there is lack of transparency and that installation depends on vendors. It would allow the ECP to follow global standards.

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What about the cost of EVMs? Have we ever estimated the cost to the nation of unfair elections and allegations of rigging, protests, dharnas, judicial cases, and above all having rulers for whom the people did not vote? If EVMs make a significant dent in rigging then their benefits far outweigh the cost in financial terms of manufacturing and using them.

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Then there is the argument regarding consensus on EVMs. The democracy we champion asks for the will of the majority and does not require consensus. Secondly ‘consensus’ remains undefined. Is it the will of all registered political parties or the parties represented in the National Assembly only? Should we take on board smaller parties represented only in the provincial assemblies? What about would-be

independent candidates? They are also stakeholders in the polls. The definition of consensus can be enlarged to take any meaning from it and suit any interest.

What if almost all political parties agree on using EVMs but party Y with just one per cent of the seats in the Assembly decides to play spoiler? Should we wait for its assent? While trying to define the term, we realise that aiming for consensus on EVMs or any poll reform is impractical; the democratic principle of ‘majority rules’ is the only practical option to aim for. Let us not forget that our National Finance Commission decides by consensus and its history is replete with deadlocks.

Hypothetically, there could be two reasons for any political party, say X, to oppose the EVMs. One, X feels that EVMs would be manipulated to its disadvantage, and two, the advantage that X enjoys in rigging the manual process would be of little value if EVMs are used. In either case, it is a question of trust. As political parties have confidence in neither the present system nor EVMs, ‘lack of trust’ cancels out in the equation.

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One can argue that if all EVMs to be used are compromised then the manipulation would be significant and systemic. The ECP’s ownership of the entire chain of manufacturing, storing and using of EVMs would to an extent address the potential of systemic manipulation. What remains is the potential of manipulation by the ECP staff itself — the political parties in the opposition seem to trust the ECP for now and the ruling coalition is already in favour of the EVMs — for election 2023 the fear of systemic manipulation becomes insignificant if the ECP were to own the entire chain.

A committee formed in 2010 on the use of EVMs had recommended that the matter be pursued in a phased manner. Not much has been done so far except for piloting EVMs in just two by-elections. This is very slow progress. Had the authorities worked since 2010 at normal bureaucratic speed, making the EVMs a reality in 2023 or even earlier would not have been difficult. The authorities can atone for their snail’s pace in the past by working on a war-footing now to make EVMs a reality.

*The writer is a researcher at PIDE.*

[\*\*ldreeshkhwaja@pide.org.pk\*\*](mailto:ldreeshkhwaja@pide.org.pk)

**Twitter:** [\*\*khawajaidrees11\*\*](#)

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