**For democracy and bijli,uninterrupted supply | The Indian Express**

For democracy and bijli,uninterrupted supply. Summary. 18-hour power cuts have switched off most voters from India or Kashmir. Benazir gone,Zardari is a pale shadow,their angry son exiled to TV land. Nawaz Sharif senses power but beyond his tired tigers and a stuffed menagerie,he also has a headache called Imran Khan. Related. 18-hour power cuts have switched off most voters from India or Kashmir. Benazir gone,Zardari is a pale shadow,their angry son exiled to TV land. Nawaz Sharif senses power but beyond his tired tigers and a stuffed menagerie,he also has a headache called Imran Khan. WRITINGS on the wall is a metaphor that emerged from our travels across India,particularly during election campaigns (for earlier writings,see http://www.indianexpress.com/ news/writings-on-the-wall/713872/). Writings on the wall,because as you drive across the countryside,your eyes open,it<U+0092>s what is written on the walls that tells you the story of what is changing,and what isn<U+0092>t. What is on top of people<U+0092>s minds,and what has been discarded. We have seen how India has moved on from grievance to aspiration,from mere roti,kapda and makaan (food,clothing and shelter) to bijli,sadak,paani (power,roads,water) and now to padhayee,sehat,naukri (education,health,jobs). We have also seen how leaders seeking the favour of these voters have altered their appeal and message accordingly. But would what works in India apply to Pakistan as well? Can you also read what is going on in Pakistani voters<U+0092> minds by reading the writings on their walls,particularly when you are visiting that country after a full 11 years? And finally,can you do it when you cannot recognise a letter of Urdu? You don<U+0092>t have to try so hard. Really. Nor do you have to look that far. Look out of your car window,walking around the street corners,the busy,typically subcontinental back-lanes of Lahore that could be a slice of West Delhi but for the donkey-carts and Urdu signage,the tri-junction where you turn for Raiwind,now famous for Mian Nawaz Sharif<U+0092>s 1,000-acre farmhouse,and most of the English acronyms on the walls would look familiar to you: BA,MSc,MBA and,somewhat less familiar,FA,the intermediate equivalent degree that used to be popular in northern India as well during our parents<U+0092> times. So that,you would say,is not particularly different from India. But what is this other three-letter acronym,U.P.S. that stares at you from wherever you look? From the walls,poles,billboards nailed to trees,village bazaars,the rears of buses,auto-rickshaws,even horse-carts? For a while,you even lazily presume it is some kind of a professional degree that is popular in Pakistan. BUT not for long. Because you attend your first election meeting,or talk to any Pakistani and ask what the major issues in this election are,and the meaning of those three letters unravels. The main issue,in fact,for many the only issue in this election,is power. As in electricity. Most of Pakistan,even the big cities,has load-shedding for 16-18 hours. And U.P.S. stands for the humble Uninterrupted Power Supply system,what we prefer to call inverter in India. It is today the hottest selling item in Pakistan and has spawned an entire cottage industry in manufacture and repair,as stark an example of broken-window economics as you have seen. Anybody you talk to,from the most prominent industrialist to your car driver,can hold forth on Pakistan<U+0092>s power problems. That no new dams have been built in decades,in fact none after Mangla and Tarbela <U+0097> and they don<U+0092>t even have a Medha Patkar. Most of the thermal power is fuelled by gas (now scarce) or furnace oil (too expensive). Government mandates low prices for most consumers,so utilities have gone bankrupt. A prominent Independent Power Plant (IPP) owner in Lahore tells us he is not being paid,so,like others,he has also shut his plant down. Sounds familiar? Except that Pakistan has not even carried out the reform India has,particularly during the past six months or so. And at least for now,Pakistan produces almost no coal. Peak hour shortages,therefore,are higher than in any part of India,even though rural electrification is more extensive in Pakistan,if you leave out the more distant tribal areas. As a consequence,power shortages diminish the quality of life of a much larger percentage of the population. And why does a country supposed to be so well endowed with natural gas,have power plants starving for it? Once again,because of energy price distortions. The price of diesel,petrol and even kerosene in Pakistan has been raised to commercially remunerative levels,Pakistani rupees 106,98 and 98.2,respectively (100 Pakistani rupees equal 54 of India<U+0092>s). While Pakistan has been brave enough to price diesel above petrol and take away all kerosene subsidy,it has,instead,heavily subsidised CNG in the belief that it was produced at home. Households have it on tap,and up to 70 per cent of the cars run on it. So the really poor pay the full price for kerosene,the really rich or upper middle class ride on subsidised gas. The power plants,meanwhile,remain idle. Both the major contestants,Nawaz Sharif (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) and Imran Khan (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf),promise to fix the power problem within three years. Nobody is convinced. But everybody blames five years of Asif Ali Zardari for it. That<U+0092>s why you do not even list him and his Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) among the major contestants. Its rout is written on the walls,in those three deathly letters: U.P.S. POWER crisis has become such an overwhelming symbol of misgovernance,it has put other vital issues in the shade. No India,no Kashmir,no Sarabjit-Sanaullah,no army,some terrorism,and a bit more of America. Nobody speaks for terrorism,but nobody promises to fight it. Everybody curses America and promises to pull away from its <U+0093>war on terror<U+0094>. And in an utterly non-level playing field,campaigning has mostly shifted to television screens. You surf through Pakistan<U+0092>s 60-odd TV channels and all you watch is paid-for political content,and labelled as such. This applies particularly to the three parties whom the Pakistani Taliban and other extremists have declared <U+0093>secular<U+0094>,and therefore they dare not even step out in the open. In the Frontier,old Khan Wali Khan<U+0092>s once famous and brave Red Shirts are now indoors and have yet lost more than a hundred to terror attacks. In Karachi,nobody has dared to hold a rally for several days now and its leading Mohajir party,MQM,campaigns on TV and through videoconferences,its supremo Altaf Hussain exiled in London for more than two decades,too scared to even visit Karachi. The kidnapping,this Thursday,of former prime minister Yousaf Raza Gilani<U+0092>s son from an election rally is just the most telling instance of how the PPP has been targeted by the same terrorists. Except,maybe,in some strongholds of interior Sindh,it is totally shut out of the campaign. It has taken refuge in television and the channel owners,who had anticipated this and upped their tariffs,are not complaining. No wonder the face you see most often is that of a very defiant,angry,and I am sorry to say,terrified-sounding Bilawal Zardari screaming to offer his head,blood,life,anything,<U+0093>kyonki yeh khoon ki ladayi hai<U+0094>. But he hasn<U+0092>t yet been seen in public. And after the Gilani kidnapping,there is no chance he would,over the weekend,either. The ruling party is right to complain that terrorists have pretty much driven them out of the contest. But even if they hadn<U+0092>t,you can<U+0092>t see how their message would have impressed Pakistan of today. Invoking the name and old speeches of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto promising to give his life for Pakistan may fire the old faithful,but they will have to be very old indeed. Because,like India,Pakistan is a young population and while a reliable census hasn<U+0092>t been held for a very long time,you can safely say that nearly 80 per cent of the voters today would have been born after Bhutto<U+0092>s execution. Bhutto<U+0092>s name,as well as the assassination/sacrifice metaphor,are both dated. The ruling party is,therefore,truly orphaned. It<U+0092>s missing Benazir<U+0092>s spunk,her husband and legatee is out of the campaign too,preferring the safety of titular presidency to the mortal dangers of this campaign. Several other leading lights have defected,mostly to Imran Khan<U+0092>s PTI. THE absence of Benazir and her PPP has made it a two-party contest,or a fight between two personalities whom you could aptly describe <U+0097> with some licence,of course <U+0097> as Loins of Punjab. Both Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan speak the language befitting full-blooded,pucca Punjabis. But for the <U+0093>Loin<U+0094> metaphor,greater credit must go to the Sharifs,whose election symbol is the tiger <U+0097> though in its posters and billboards it has been caricatured as some kind of a character from ancient Babylonian art,with the striped body of a tiger and the face more like that of a cow. His campaigners parade live tigers through city streets,drive them on trailers on rural roads. In Lahore this Monday,it was followed by a live band and turbaned singer Nasir Beraj,seeking votes to the tune of a tappy Tanu Weds Manu number <U+0093>kadi saadi gali mud ke vi aaya karo<U+0094> (moharan sher utte atth-atth laya karo). Excited crowds follow them screaming with perverse delight,oye sher,oye sher,poking the poor animal with sticks,throwing pebbles,even little pieces of meat,sometimes teasing it,sometimes cajoling it,as if it was a pet dog. And if the desperate,angry,hungry,thirsty,panicky and often heat-struck tiger even growls in protest,there are howls of joy. Your day is made. <U+0093>Don<U+0092>t poke the tiger,<U+0094> I risk trying to reason with one breathless,lumpen. Not yet willing to accept the futility of trying to teach instant zoology to a mob of excited Lahoris,I point to the animal<U+0092>s stripes to argue why it is a tiger. <U+0093>Oye sher hai,disda nahin tainu,<U+0094> (it is a lion,can<U+0092>t you see?) <U+0093>sher hai,sher,LOIN,b…….d.<U+0094> I retreat at this point. One of the tigers used in the campaign died of exhaustion this Wednesday,poked,harassed,starved,terrorised and dehydrated,I presume,and not particularly because they said rude things about its sister. You see the lions (not tigers) at the entrance of the Sharif family living room at Raiwind. The very impressive stuffed animals have been imported from Zimbabwe,and you see more stuffed animals as you look around,deer of several kinds,fox and then live,exotic birds,including peacocks,in various colours. I am seeing Nawaz Sharif after almost seven years,although our friendship <U+0097> and I use that expression seriously,and also as a disclosure <U+0097> goes back a quarter century. He has put on some weight lately. But he also talks more like a liberal politician than he did in the past. He reminds me of a conversation we once had on how a society and its leaders had to pay their dues to earn the blessing of real democracy,and how it was often done by going to jail. Nawaz Sharif has done more than that. Fourteen months in terrible confinement,and then six years in exile. The good thing is,he learnt the right lessons from that experience,the first of them being that to keep the army out,he had to reach out to fellow politicians,particularly his rivals. He has helped his arch enemy PPP last its full term,knowing the symbolic and substantive effect it would have in a country where elected governments have traditionally been treated as interregnums between military rule,and where each coup has succeeded,without even a bullet having to be fired. He says he wants to move on now,but will he forgive Pervez Musharraf? Not for subverting Pakistan<U+0092>s constitution,for destroying its still incipient institutions. And then he talks with a sense of pain <U+0097> and anger <U+0097> about how he was treated in captivity. How he was taken from Rawalpindi in a propeller-driven aircraft that took seven hours reaching Karachi after refuelling in Multan,while he sat handcuffed to the seat through the journey. But he senses power in his grasp now and,like many other traditional politicians (a change in the mostly feudal,winner-takes-all Pakistan of the past),he is willing to forget and move on. But he has one problem nagging him now,a man called Imran Khan. So far,he had thought he was going to sweep Punjab,maybe bag more than a hundred of its 148 seats (out of a total National Assembly strength of 342). His party has done a stellar job with infrastructure in Punjab,particularly in Lahore. A 29-km bus rapid corridor has been set up in a mere 10 months. Lakhs ride it every day and bless the Sharifs for it. Unlike the botched up BRT of New Delhi,ruined by nitwit ideological fantasies of denying road space to cars,this is an uncluttered infrastructural idea. Where possible,the road has been expanded to make fenced lanes in the middle. Elsewhere,for a full 9 km,the corridor has been elevated,and all in 10 months. Dozens of new underpasses,ring roads and flyovers have transformed the city. If there is one thing the Sharifs are known for,it is execution. Therefore it is their claims on fixing the power situation that people are most likely to find convincing. Further,his traditional rival,PPP,was missing,the religious parties were either with him or discredited. And Imran Khan was more like a side-show,a bit of an irritant or entertainment,depending on how you looked at him. But that has changed lately. Which is why,this early morning,as we chew our deep-fried shrimp and chicken,his war council is already assembling in his living room. Tariq Azeem Khan,a prominent veteran politician (now senator) and his key advisor,is joined by his former principal secretary and Tariq Fatemi,a former ambassador. His brother Shahbaz (less than two years younger than him),the chief minister of Punjab,joins in and then follows daughter Maryam,the latest and most persuasive young entrant in his campaign. There is some talk around Imran and,while working furiously on her smartphone,she jokes about her uncle<U+0092>s latest slogan,<U+0093>utte Allah,nichche balla,tey Imran reh gaya kalla. (Allah in his heaven,the cricket bat <U+0097> PTI<U+0092>s election symbol <U+0097> on the earth,and Imran left to fend for himself.)<U+0094> But there is concern in the air. There is some talk around Imran<U+0092>s rallies. And while some of the participants say they are flops,there is a screen being set up behind the sofas for a PowerPoint presentation on further strategy. The only concern,it is said,is that Imran is making very good use of electronic media. The presentation,you<U+0092>d presume,is on how to counter that. Midway through a campaign that had looked like a one-horse,or rather a one-sher race,it seems the Sharifs have something to worry about. (Tomorrow: When Imran Khan goes hunting for <U+0093>circus ke sher<U+0094> and why Faiz Ahmed Faiz would have asked,just whose side am I on?)