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## Qureshi's about-turn costs him a lot

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Qureshi's about-turn costs him a lot

By Rauf Klasra  
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ISLAMABAD: The dramatic about-turn of Shah Mahmood Qureshi from the champion of farmers' rights into the elitist fold of foreign ministers of Pakistan has been rejected by the poverty-stricken farmers of the Seraiki region, which is a traditional stronghold of the PPP. The farmers have now taken sweet revenge by handing a shocking defeat to his brother in the by-elections. On Thursday, the PPP lost both the seats, which were vacated by its two winning candidates — one of whom was Shah Mahmood Qureshi.

The shocking decision of the President of the Zarai Taraqqati Bank Limited (ZTBL), Mansoor Khan, to put the lands of small poverty-stricken farmers of the Seraiki region on auction just before the polls, is said to have sealed the fate of the PPP, whose government simply ignored its rural voters in the new budget.

The farmers who had voted the PPP in the last elections now for understandable reasons had pinned high hopes in the first budget of the otherwise farmer-friendly PPP government. They particularly expected writing off loans of small farmers, massive subsidies on oil, fertilisers, inputs, tractors, reduction in mark-up for agricultural loans, etc. But to their utter disbelief, nothing of that sort happened. Their revenge from the PPP gives a clear indication of what can be expected in the region if the country faces mid-term elections. The PPP won 23 MNA seats only from the Seraiki regions that enabled the party to form the government in the Centre.

This defeat comes on the heels of a joint address only days before these elections, of none other than PM Yousuf Raza Gilani and Shah Mahmood Qureshi at a political rally in Jahanian. But, this mega show failed to impress the angry voters of the PPP, who were facing the worst crises in the farming sector without any viable support from the party, which they have been voting into power since 1970s.

According to political analysts, Shah Mahmood is himself to blame for the defeat, as he preferred to grab the high-profile position of the foreign minister, instead of choosing to become the agriculture minister and use his competency to uplift the farming sector.

Previously, Shah Mahmood had become an effective voice of the farming community when he formed the Farmers' Association of Pakistan (FAP) to guard the interests of farmers. The FAP soon became a forum to take the government to task. With the passage of time, as Shah Mahmood's political activities increased, the importance of the FAP diminished.

Benazir Bhutto had used the talents of Shah Mahmood as deputy minister of agriculture in her second government, as she knew he would be in a better position to help the farmers to get a better deal and the PPP would keep its vote bank intact. However, Asif Zardari decided to compensate him when he promoted Yousuf Raza Gilani as the prime minister. Qureshi was offered the slot of the foreign minister, which he accepted too eagerly. The farmers expected that Qureshi would become the agriculture minister and try to bring about some change in their lives. But they did not know that Qureshi had something else on his mind, as he was more concerned about the nature of portfolio than doing something for the poverty-stricken farmers. And he has now paid a big price for the choice.

Likewise, another important seat the PPP lost was in Muzaffargarh that was vacated by PPP MNA Qayyum Jatoi. The anti-farmer budget of the PPP government is said to have also annoyed the farmers there, who could not believe that the PPP, which had always been the farmers' voice, could not find a suitable man from the party to appoint him as the agriculture minister. Likewise, the police were used to arrest the farmers refusing to sell wheat, along with the decision of the ZTBL to auction the land of small farmers. The writing on the wall is clear, the farming community has decided not to be betrayed by their party and take this lying down. The gloves are now off!

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