

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

Islamabad

It is an unfortunate but well-known tradition of the World Health Organisation (WHO) that the best candidate doesn't win the election of its Director-General (DG). Therefore, it didn't come as a surprise that Dr. Sania Nishtar didn't get elected.

The sorry electoral politics of the United Nations system were seen to be at play once again on May 23. I have had feedback from several ministers of health who were present in the Assembly room of the Palais de Nations in Geneva on that day, when Member States voted for a new DG. I have spoken to many journalists, experts and members of delegations who were in the side rooms of the Palais, listening to Dr. Sania's powerful and inspiring speech. I got the sense of the pulse of the Palais on that day from many people—and the same words echoed “she was the best; she was presenting a ground-breaking opportunity to reform WHO; such a clean approach could be transformational for the UN's electoral system; it is WHO's, the world's and the UN system's loss.”

Dr. Sania accepted defeat with much grace, and we expected nothing less from her, but her candidacy and the campaign she ran brought three victories for Pakistan.

To begin with, the campaign seems to have set an international benchmark for its ethical and principled approach and grounding in integrity. The UN election system is a “landmine of compromises for candidates.” Dr. Sania rose above “deal-making,” which is a hallmark of UN elections and has come out of the election process with clean hands and the respect of the global health community. The seminal wrap-up words in her speech “the road to any systemic reform must start with integrity as its starting point” convey a very important message. Due to her principled stance in the election, she was being supported by many—from volunteers who gave their time in the hope for a better-run UN agency, to journalists and ordinary citizens and many global leaders, who came openly in her support. A recognized young leader tweeted: “You inspired a generation who resolved to follow your integrity.” For a Pakistani woman to show to the world that a global UN election campaign can also be run with integrity and dignity, is clearly a big win for Pakistan.

Secondly, this was perhaps the first time, after Benazir Bhutto, that a positive and progressive side of Pakistan was shown by a Pakistani woman to the world at such a global scale. We have had women being awarded at the highest level, Nobel Prize and Oscars—which are laudable for individuals—but for the country, those ‘achievements’ highlight a negative side of the country. What is novel about Dr. Sania's candidature was that she portrayed a positive and progressive image of Pakistan. From the Caribbean to the Pacific Islands, across all continents—she met 191 ministers of health, heads of states, and high-level country delegations. You need

only to speak to any Pakistan Ambassador who was present during the meeting to get a sense of how inspiring she was, and what an impression she left with her command of the subject and demeanor. She flew the flag high, not just for Pakistan but also for so many others—for countries neglected in UN leadership, developing countries, women, members of the Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) communities, and the Islamic world—and she did so with cutting-edge new ideas and grace. Her candidature projected the true image of a progressive Islamic woman.

Thirdly, Dr. Sania's candidacy united Pakistan in a way in which we have rarely seen before, except during a war-like situation. She is an independent person with no political leanings—despite that, everyone supported her campaign—the government, political factions, in fact, the society at large. Pakistan's civil society and women's groups rallied behind her campaign. Perhaps it was her commitment to integrity in the campaign at a time when people are increasingly appreciating its value and the fact that she truly deserved to get the job that rallied people behind her.

As Pakistanis, we all realized that she had embarked on a difficult mission of challenging the status quo in the international system with limited financial means. She proposed to bring forward, boldly initiated reforms, innovative working modalities, and more accountability and transparency, and vowed to raise WHO to its former glory. These are all the attributes needed in the international system—but despite that, Dr. Sania was not elected. To any who may not have voted her for no “sin other than that of being born in Pakistan” as Laurie Garriett remarked in Foreign Policy on May 22, the global community has lost a great opportunity. We in Pakistan are delighted to have her back but also recognize that her skills and leadership belong to the world, and that soon enough we must share her again. Thank you Dr. Sania Nishtar, for all that you have done.

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