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Pakistan Prepares for Polls: Dilemmas of its Democracy

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However unlikely it might have seemed from time to time, Pakistan's forward movement along the path of democracy now appears to be inexorable. It has demonstrated the perfect example of the very British art of 'muddling through'. Elements of uncertainty still remain, as they always do in a game of cricket that its people take to as duck to water. But barring an act of God, elections will take place on 11 May 2013. For the first time in its history an elected civilian government has completed its full term in office and a peaceful transfer of power, or a continuation of the same, is widely expected.

The mechanism for the holding of elections, the system of 'caretaker government', has indeed worked better in Pakistan than the country it was borrowed from, Bangladesh. Ironically, it has since been discarded in the latter, whose politics now seem to be mired in a sea of uncertainty. But Pakistan has managed to use the model perhaps more effectively, and even sharpen and hone it to suit its own peculiar circumstances.

In Pakistan, Balochistan is a troubled province that also has a raging insurgency, which has not received too many sops from the nation in the past. Now it has been given one, in that that the new Caretaker Prime Minister is from there. He is a retired Judge, or Justice, as members of benches of Higher Courts are called in these parts. In no other political system does a country's Election Commission act as an electoral college; but in Pakistan, where

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some things are very different from those of most other places, the task of electing the Prime Minister fell upon this body, which did so by choosing Justice (Retired) Mir Hazar Khoso four votes to one. Khoso is 84 years old, but in this region, advanced age is not a bar to but has a premium for holding high office, despite, very often, the mounting medical bills of its leadership. His formal boss will be the comparatively youthful, President Asif Ali Zardari (also, Chair of the Pakistan People's Party) who at 58, is looking to another five-year term as President (though his cardiac-related trips to Dubai have been somewhat frequent, unless some of these are, as is suspected, more politics-related!)

Overall, Zardari might appear to the voter the better of a none-too-tempting bargain, though a recent report, if true, may dent PPP's prospects. It is that his son, Bilawal Bhutto (the nominal Co-Chair of the party) has left Pakistan in a huff over a tiff with his father and aunt, Faryal Talpur, over PPP policies. At 24, the loss of Bilawal may not be an enormous blow, but he was tasked to buttress support among the youth. Also, in a party where the 'Bhutto' name is hugely important, it must be remembered that while Bilawal is blood-linked to the Bhutto family, Zardari is only connected by marriage!

In Pakistan, political leaders do not live up Easy Street. Still, to re-phrase Lord Acton, even in Pakistan power attracts and absolute power attracts absolutely! So, unsurprisingly there are many others anxious to oust Zardari and his PPP. Among them is the irrepressible Pervez Musharraf, the former military ruler, back home at long last from his self-imposed exile abroad. His reception upon return was not the same that greeted the prodigal son in the Biblical tale, but was very tepid. His best friends, the Americans, seemed to have also let go of him, with the American Ambassador saying that as far as the US is concerned it is the Pakistanis who are to choose their next government. To the rational observer, it will seem like merely stating the obvious, but in Pakistan the hidden hand of America in all major things is feared, often with reason. Musharraf may thus be left with the lesson that the only way for him to capture power was, as he indeed had, through the barrel of a gun and not through the ballot box.

Zardari's arch rival, Mian Nawaz Sharif, and his Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) are waiting to give battle. He and his brother Shahbaz run Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province whose Chief Minister Shahbaz is; but the brothers are learning the hard way that Pakistan is much more than Punjab than they had thought. The PML(N) is conservative, strong in urban centres, but possibly not strong enough to catapult them into power at the centre. The other major contender is the former cricketing hero, Imran Khan, who has recently drawn large crowds, but his wicket gets sticky when people seek to assess his political maturity to lead this volatile country. He is stridently anti-American, which is not necessarily a political 'minus' in Pakistan. He does not appear to have much else in the form of fresh ideas in foreign policy, particularly with regard to key issues like relations with India or Afghanistan. His type of 'welfarism' smacks somewhat of the 'Islamic socialism' of the PPP which is a political passé in Pakistan.

The Army has so far remained withdrawn from the domestic political milieu. It has quite a task on its hands fighting extremism on a daily basis. At this time it cannot risk soiling its hands with 'dirty' politics, for popularity is its oxygen for survival. Come November it will have a change of guard, as General Ashfaq Kayani, the current Chief of Staff, is due to retire. In Pakistan, for an Army Chief to fade away into civilian life, without an attempt at supreme political power, is not unknown, but nevertheless remarkable. For now at least, the dilemmas of its democracy have been put to rest. The process of elimination, therefore, tends to point to a return to office of Zardari's PPP, all allegations of corruption notwithstanding, and yet it is too hazardous a guess in a country where the churning of politics is often as swift as the swirl of the waters of the Indus!

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