CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

Pakistan's General Election: Continuity or Change?

Dr Farzana Shaikh

Associate Fellow, Asia Programme, Chatham House

Professor Ian Talbot

Professor of Modern British History, University of Southampton

Declan Walsh

Correspondent for Pakistan and Afghanistan, *The Guardian* (2004-11); Pakistan Bureau Chief, *New York Times*

Chair: Bridget Kendall

Diplomatic Correspondent, BBC

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Bridget Kendall:

I'm Bridget Kendall, I'm BBC Diplomatic Correspondent – by no means an expert on Pakistan, so I am chairing this from the point of view of a generalist. This event is on the record.

It gives me very great pleasure to introduce our speakers. On my far right is Dr Farzana Shaikh, who's an associate fellow of the Asia Programme at Chatham House and a former research fellow of Clare Hall in Cambridge. She has just begun a one-year fellowship in Paris, where she's working on a project on the politics of Sufism in Pakistan. She's also published widely on Pakistan; you may know her latest book, *Making Sense of Pakistan*.

Next to her is Declan Walsh, who was based in Pakistan since 2004, first for the *Guardian* and then the *New York Times*. Most recently, earlier this month, he was deported for unspecified 'undesirable activities'. Maybe he will tell us a bit more about this.

On my left is Professor Ian Talbot, who is professor of modern British history at the University of Southampton, with a long-time interest in the division of India and the emergence of Pakistan. He's written a major study about that. Most recently, he has a major book, *Pakistan: A Modern History*, published in 1999 and reissued and expanded in 2005 and 2008.

The empty chair on my left, which I hope won't remain empty for the whole of our discussion, should be filled by my colleague from the BBC Urdu Service, Aamer Ahmed Khan, who is in charge of our Urdu Service, which gives news services to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Before that he was editor of Pakistan's premier news magazine, the *Herald*. So let's hope he's going to come too.

This is a very good moment, of course, to discuss where we are with Pakistan, just after the general election – for the first time in Pakistan's history, transferring from one elected government to another – and just before the new assembly meets, just before the new prime minister takes over. It's a very good moment to take stock and consider how far this is a turning point for Pakistan and, if so, what might change.

I'm going to ask all our speakers to give us a few words, five to seven minutes, before we open it up to more general discussion, and of course there will be questions. Can I ask you, Dr Farzana Shaikh, to start us off.

Farzana Shaikh:

Thank you, Bridget. Thank you all for being here. It's a pleasure. We've had to wait until this moment to, as Bridget said, take stock of what's happened in Pakistan. A momentous event, it is claimed – we will just have to wait and see. I'm sure my colleague to the far left, Professor Talbot, will tell us that it's much too early to tell what all this means for Pakistan.

I think looking at these elections and the results of these elections, what is most striking is the way the winning party, the victor, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), the faction of the Pakistan Muslim League which is dominated by Prime Minister-elect Nawaz Sharif, has effectively been transformed from a party which once had roots in the establishment – by which of course here I mean the military, and was seen very much as a protégé of the military in the 1980s – has been transformed from an establishment party to an anti-establishment force. It would seem that many now look to Mr Sharif to circumscribe the powers of the most powerful unelected state institution in Pakistan – that is, the military. I think it's fair to say that one of the interesting things that's emerged in the last few weeks is the extent of support Mr Sharif now enjoys within sections of Pakistan's liberal intelligentsia.

I don't have much time, but I do just want to touch very briefly on what I would call some of the short-term domestic challenges facing Mr Sharif, some of the long-term domestic challenges, short-term foreign policy challenges and the long-term foreign policy challenges.

I think without a doubt the most immediate question and challenge domestically facing Mr Sharif would have to be the resolution of the power crisis in Pakistan, and negotiating some kind of settlement or ceasefire, if you will, with Taliban groups. Addressing these two issues will have a direct impact on Pakistan's economy, which Mr Sharif has promised to restore to some kind of viable state.

I think the long-term domestic challenges for Mr Sharif will clearly focus on managing the federation, because I think what these elections showed is precisely how deep the ethnic fault lines are in Pakistan. I would not be the first one to say that while these elections represented something of an advance for democracy, they were certainly a setback for the federation. I think it's also fair to say that unlike the PPP (Pakistan People's Party) really, there is no party now with that kind of national reach. Even the PPP for all practical purposes has been reduced to an ethnic party. The PML-N, as we know, is very much a Punjabi-based party; Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-

Insaf, pretty much confined to the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; and Baluchistan equally divided between Baluchi and Pashtun nationalist parties. So really, I think he's going to have to handle managing the federation.

I think Mr Sharif is also going to have to address the whole question of Pakistan's minority communities. Will there be a fresh debate on reforming or repealing Pakistan's extremely discriminatory blasphemy laws, and ending what I think many would now accept is pretty much the systematic persecution of Pakistan's non-Muslim minorities and those who are considered not to be 'real Muslims'?

I think the short-term foreign policy challenges for Mr Sharif, some of which he's touched on – the most important thing, again with a direct impact possibly on the elections, is normalizing relations with India, I would say easing tensions with Afghanistan, but above all, I think, overcoming the trust deficit with the United States. We will be talking more about what the latest drone strike has meant for the state of US–Pakistan relations.

In the long term, I think his foreign policy challenges will certainly focus on recalibrating somewhat Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as reaching out to Central Asia.

I'll stop it there and hand over to the next speaker.

Bridget Kendall:

Thank you, Farzana, that's a great introduction to begin with. Let's go back a little bit in history now with Professor Ian Talbot – your view of what these elections could mean.

Ian Talbot:

The first thing is that 55 per cent turnout – the highest in Pakistan's history. Although obviously the elections had some problems because of the campaign against the so-called secular parties by Pakistan Taliban, on the whole the election process I think was fair, although some of Imran Khan's supporters would point to irregularities in a number of polling stations.

But I think what is important to say is that probably the outcome was not what the military-security establishment wanted. They wanted a hung parliament. They didn't get that. The fact that Nawaz Sharif has a secure majority is very good for the consolidation of democracy. Aside from party politics, it's very important for the mainstream parties in Pakistan to be as untrammelled as

possible in their dealings with the establishment. Certainly the outgoing government, because of the coalition problems which it had over a number of years, didn't have the advantages to get to grips with some of these profound problems which Pakistan faces at the moment, which have already been touched on a little bit by Farzana – particularly the energy situation, the economy as a whole, and obviously the situation *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan, looking forward to December 2014 and what will happen thereafter in that neighbouring country, and in relations with India.

So I think the fact that the elections, one, showed that people were prepared to go and vote – they weren't intimidated despite numerous threats; the turnout even in KP was about 40 per cent – shows a step forward in consolidation of democracy. The fact that there is the possibility of a stable government and a working relationship with the PPP and PML-N is possible, so that this government can also see through its term of five years – I think to have two governments which do that will actually be another important long-term, historical step for consolidation of democracy.

So those are some of the positives which have come out, looking at this campaign from a longer-term perspective. Obviously there are still problems. The smaller number of women elected from direct assembly seats than before – still, then, a gender imbalance to be addressed. There obviously have been these claims, as been mentioned, *vis-à-vis* vote-rigging. Of course there was a particular problem in one constituency in Karachi. So it's not a clean bill of health but nevertheless we've got to look at it in terms of what might have been, and I think in some sense this has been a positive step forward.

How Nawaz Sharif addresses some of these big issues is impossible to say at such an early stage. Is he going to have learned some of the lessons from the 1990s, when he ran into terrible problems with the other institutions of Pakistan, including the judiciary, the presidency and of course the army, most importantly? Has he learned anything? Has he moved on from a zero-sum-game approach to politics, which dominated the way he conducted relations with the PPP in that period of time as well?

I would say that while we shouldn't play this up too much, I think he has learned some lessons from his experiences and in that sense has perhaps shown one or two signs, even during the election campaign itself, that he can distinguish between democratic consolidation and consolidation of his own party interests – which he certainly was unable to do, in his own personal interests, in the 1990s. He's got to continue to do that if democracy is really

going to be consolidated over the next five years. Obviously the jury is out at the moment because it's far too early to say, but there may be some signs that that is possible.

Also, and I'll finish on this point, there may even be structural changes which will remove some of the frictions between the military and Nawaz Sharif. Pakistan is very different today from the 1990s, just as Nawaz Sharif may be a different person from the 1990s. The military have a major stake in the economic success of Pakistan. So in a sense, I think even if Nawaz Sharif is seen to be moving forward on issues such as trade with India, which groundwork has already been established by the PPP government – if he moves ahead on that front then, one, he is doing things which his own constituency of supporters may like, but it might also chime in with the military's own interest, because they don't want economic failure. They need Pakistan to be successful economically. In order to do that, Pakistan has to have better trading relations with its massive Indian neighbour.

I mean, there's three things that Pakistan can do to improve its economic position. One is obviously to get IMF support, which is probably going to come with all kinds of conditions attached to it. Secondly, there is the issue of what support is it going to get from Saudi Arabia. Obviously, with Nawaz Sharif in control, it will get more support from Saudi Arabia than the PPP has been able to acquire. Thirdly, its own economic house has to be put in order, but it has to have more normal trading relations with India. People talk about a massive peace dividend. It was there in the 1990s; it is even more there as a potential for the future. The military would have an interest in that.

There are certain redlines which Nawaz Sharif cannot cross *vis-à-vis* India without running into trouble with the military, but trade is not one of them. The redlines are him taking major steps forward on Kashmir, which the military will not want a civilian politician to be doing without an input from them. If he moves on Lashkar-e-Taiba also, that's another redline for the military as well. If he doesn't do those things and concentrates on trade with India, confidence-building measures, there's no reason why an opening to India by Nawaz Sharif will not open more democratic space in Pakistan – which is very important – but it doesn't necessarily mean that there's going to be a replay of Kargil and that it's going to lead to friction with the military. So he's actually got more space to do things perhaps than some people might think. There are other banana skins which he has to negotiate *vis-à-vis* the army: what happens to Pervez Musharraf; Kayani's replacement. But I think he's got the wisdom to sidestep these particular banana skins early on in his government. I'll finish on that.

Bridget Kendall:

Thank you very much. Now a very up-to-date view from Declan Walsh, who just left Pakistan very shortly, just a few weeks ago.

Declan Walsh:

From the perspective of a reporter – I covered these elections; I covered the previous elections as well, in 2008 – I have to say, one of the striking things about this election was just how exciting it was. Obviously there was this sort of, not quite technical, but democratic milestone that people spoke about, that this was the first time that a civilian government had served its first full, five-year term and transferred to another. But actually much more than that during the campaign, there was this incredible sense of excitement and political vibrancy about the campaign, with Imran Khan – we haven't spoken much about him here yet, but it's easy to forget that particularly in the last week of campaigning there was so much speculation that he was going to do much better than he did. In fairness, at the end of the day, Imran Khan actually did quite well. I think he's got close to 30 seats at the moment and has emerged as a sort of third force in politics, and has already started to make his mark on the debate in Pakistan with the fact that his party now controls the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

I was just reading in today's paper, there were some comments about the drone strike against Wali ur-Rehman, the Taliban deputy leader who was killed a couple of days ago. You had already Imran Khan's party coming out and saying, well, if we were in the centre, this wouldn't have happened. Whether that's true or not is another matter, but the point is it shows how Imran Khan's party, as a new opposition force, is going to frame the debate for Nawaz Sharif at least on some of these issues going forward – because, of course, they have a shared electoral zone of competition in Punjab. I think they will already be starting to think about 2018.

So an electrifying campaign. A result that has confounded many of the pundits, particularly with the strong mandate that Nawaz Sharif has won. One of the striking things in coverage since then that I've noticed from Pakistan is the huge media support. I've seen articles in *Newsweek (Pakistan)* where people are comparing him to Jinnah, or saying that he could be the most significant leader since Jinnah. They are talking about him as transformational. It reminds me of one of the great, if I can generalize, qualities about Pakistanis, which is this fantastic ability for amnesia, because when you think about when in 2009 [*sic*] the whole country, as far as I

understood, were at least for about 10 minutes united on the fact that it was a good idea that Nawaz Sharif was leaving and the military was taking over.

Short term, obviously the thing that is occupying the agenda a lot at the moment is the electricity crisis, which of course is very grave. Nawaz Sharif is going to immediately concentrate on trying to clear this $5 billion circular debt issue so that they can literally switch the lights on again, they can get money into the system so that the power plants will be able to start their oil furnaces again and get the power moving. But the problem is that this circular debt issue has been addressed before and of course it's just a sticking plaster, because what you're just doing is deferring the hard decisions further down the line about structural reform in the power sector, reforming prices, making government departments and other people pay their bills, transmission centres, provision of new power plants. There are so many technical issues but some of which strike at Nawaz Sharif's political heartland – very difficult decisions he'll have to take that will hurt some of his own supporters.

I think in a sense the electricity crisis, the power crisis, is part of the broader crisis of the economy, that's already been alluded to here, that he faces – which is indeed extremely grave in Pakistan. They have the massive public debt which is starting to consume the government finances. The public sector is in crisis. There is obviously this electricity crisis. So as he faces these challenges of short-term versus long-term in electricity, he also faces similar issues with regard to the economy. Already the signs that his people have given is that they will seek finance to alleviate the problem. That's good for making people feel good in the short term but again, it comes back to this issue of more deep-rooted reform that Pakistan needs to reverse what is actually a pretty alarming situation.

One of the things that strikes me, looking back over the last number of years, is this whole issue of foreign investment. Major foreign companies, if you like, have lost confidence in Pakistan. There was one episode where the mine in Baluchistan called Reko Diq, which was this huge copper and gold project that had been in the works for several decades, the company in question had invested $200–300 million in exploration and so on – it's a long story, but over a series of events basically the rug was pulled from under them and as far as I know the project is on ice at the moment. Apart from the merits of what that would have brought for Pakistan, it sent a terrible signal to the international business community that if you put money in Pakistan, even in a contract with the government, your money is not safe. I think that was a pretty worrisome thing that Sharif will be well placed to address.

Just moving quickly, a couple of other quick thoughts. I agree very much with what Farzana said about where he's going to stand with the army, whether he's going to be seen as an anti-establishment force. He's already given signs that he may take the portfolios of defence and the foreign ministry for himself, which would be quite a lot of work apart from anything else. But it does send a sign that he seems to be very focused on this idea of overcoming the perception that he's going to have a problem with the army. Even against the better advice of people within his own party, he's been quite hostile toward the military for the last number of years. It's going to be very interesting to see what sort of effort he does make to stay on the same page with regard to America, with regard to India, and particularly now with regard to the drone issue, which has just come into the news.

On that drone issue, which is something we've covered quite a lot: as I said, Mr Sharif is slightly defined by the Imran Khan position, who really capitalized on that. There have been suggestions the last few days that in his meeting with the American envoy, who he saw I think yesterday morning, he held out this idea – or at least, this is what they're projecting in the Pakistani media – that Pakistani cooperation in the American exit from Afghanistan would be contingent on finding what they're calling 'a solution' to the drone issue. I suspect he will be quite pragmatic with the Americans. I suspect – this is now the third Pakistani government that is in place when the drone campaign is going on. I think he will probably be more pragmatic than he's appearing in public. I suspect anyway that the American drone campaign will wind down over the next 12–18 months.

But underneath all of that, the Americans will leave, just in the way the British left the FATA when they fought a long campaign there in the 1930s and 1940s. The problem for Pakistan is when the drones are gone and so on, the problem of the FATA will remain. Unless Mr Sharif's government makes serious strides towards bringing the FATA at least some measure into the mainstream, then I think Pakistan's pressing security problem will remain.

Bridget Kendall:

Thank you for addressing the drone question. Perhaps I could press you a little more on the question of Afghanistan and the Taliban, because that's also something that Mr Sharif talked about during his campaign, that in the talks – this recent drone attack on the deputy head of the Taliban, and the announcement of that means they will withdraw from the talks. Where do you

see that side of Pakistan's foreign policy going under Mr Sharif? Has he got much room for manoeuvre, for changing anything?

Declan Walsh:

In terms of Afghanistan, his relations with America will be very much framed by the American withdrawal through 2014. A sort of subsidiary issue within that is the issue of talks with the Afghan Taliban and what role Pakistan will play. To be perfectly frank, I'm not sure there are going to be any significant talks with the Afghan Taliban that will result in anything significant before 2014. I think it's possibly too late for that now. But Pakistan's stance in any talks, the goodwill that it shows, the way that it facilitates the American withdrawal, in terms of logistics and so on, from Afghanistan, will be important.

In terms of the Pakistani Taliban, I think it's quite a separate question. There are a lot of talks about talks at the moment. There was in the run-up to the elections, and there's still a little bit now about talks with the Pakistani Taliban. Indeed, the Pakistani Taliban themselves are playing the same game. After Wali ur-Rehman was killed, they suddenly turned around and said, well, those talks that we talked about – now we're not up for it. Even though I don't recall there was anything substantial taking place.

So the rhetoric of talks has become part of the political dialogue in Pakistan. But personally I'm slightly at a loss to see what, frankly, there is to talk about with the Pakistani Taliban right now. Talking with an insurgency I think is important, as Afghanistan shows. These things inevitably have to be settled with politics. But the Pakistani Taliban has not really given much of a coherent political vision that I've seen. I often wonder what Pakistani politicians would be willing to cede to them at this point. That's what I think on that.

Farzana Shaikh:

I will just speak up on this last point and say that I think Declan is absolutely right. One of the problems with these so-called proposed talks – really, all the discussions have been very tentative – is, who exactly are they going to talk to? Who is Islamabad going to talk to? The Pakistani Taliban are deeply factionalized, deeply divided, very fragmented. It is by no means clear who the chief interlocutor is going to be. Yesterday we heard, for example, that Wali ur-Rehman was poised to act as a potential negotiator. But we also know that he was considered a rival of Hakimullah Mehsud. There is a

suggestion even that this may have been an inside job – that it was Hakimullah Mehsud's men who led the Americans to Wali ur-Rehman. So there's a lot of infighting, a lot of factionalism, within the Pakistani Taliban that I think present a huge challenge to Mr Sharif if he does want to kick-start these talks.

But I think more fundamentally than that is: what are going to be the terms of these talks? Will the Taliban agree to sit around a table where the starting point is respecting the constitution of Pakistan? What sorts of guarantees is Mr Sharif, who's been, I must say, extremely vague about these talks – deeply ambiguous about these talks – what sort of guarantees can he offer the people of Pakistan to show that these talks will succeed where others have failed? On both counts, he's going to have to be far more persuasive than he has been to date.

Bridget Kendall:

What about the question of American drone strikes? You said this is one of the big challenges, to do something about the trust deficit. Here we are, we have a major American attack directly related to Pakistan. Of course they have protested, but are we going to see anything different from Mr Sharif's government?

Farzana Shaikh:

No. I'm on record as saying that I think Mr Sharif and his new government are going to have to bite the bullet on drones and accept that drone strikes are likely to continue at least until 2014. I agree with Declan that Mr Sharif is going to be pragmatic about this. He needs American support. Pakistan's economy is tanking; to restore it to any kind of shape is unimaginable without international assistance. I think Mr Sharif understands this. He is going to find a way to be pragmatic about this. As I said, grit his teeth, and continue sort of harping about drones posing a challenge to Pakistan's sovereignty, but in actual fact is going to find that there's very little he can do about it, at least in the short term. At least until 2014.

Bridget Kendall:

Ian, is there something you would like to add?

Ian Talbot:

Only the fact that obviously the military now are much less keen on talks with the Pakistan Taliban, partly I think – and this has been said by some people as a potential clash with Nawaz Sharif – because of the experiences under the Musharraf regime, where a number of agreements were signed. None of them lasted, and indeed the prelude to the last set of agreements was the Swat episode, which really was a tipping point when people in Pakistan began to see that yes, the Pakistan Taliban are not potential allies in the struggle in Afghanistan but a real threat to the Pakistan state as it exists. I'm sure Nawaz Sharif would take the same position on this as Kayani in his recent speech, in which he said that as far as talks were concerned, the starting point has got to be accepting the constitution of Pakistan. I think that rules out any talks with the Taliban, because they haven't any sort of policy at all. It's a very different vision for the Pakistan state than that set down in the 1973 constitution and its various amendments.