

ISAS Brief

No. 55 – Date: 22 February 2008

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The Pakistan Elections: A Political Analysis

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After nine years of military and quasi-military rule, which included a contrived and rigged election in 2002, Pakistanis finally went to the polls on 18 February 2008. Notwithstanding fear of terrorist attacks at the election booths, over 46 percent of eligible voters cast their vote. The environment was most explosive: manifest rigging would have set in motion mass protests. The large number of foreign observers and Pakistani volunteers who monitored the election agreed that the elections were, by and large, free and fair. The people voted clearly for change.

Since early March last year, when President Musharraf blundered by declaring Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry of the Pakistan Supreme Court non-functional – a novel euphemism for dismissal – on charges of abuse of public office, his worries only multiplied. His secular-liberal support base began to diminish rapidly. The lawyers came out protesting and continued their campaign despite repression. They were joined by civil society actors concerned with human rights and civil liberties and also political cadres from the oppositional parties.

The Islamists were already up in arms against him for allegedly waging the United States' war on terror on Muslims; many of them being fellow Pakistanis, ironically once trained by both Pakistan and the United States to wage jihad in Afghanistan. In early July 2007 Musharraf ordered a crackdown on the heavily-armed Islamists barricading in the Lal Masjid in Islamabad. Hundreds of people were killed. Revenge terrorist attacks by the Islamists followed immediately. They mainly targeted government functionaries but also completely innocent people were not spared.

By early October 2007, it was clear that the government was desperately trying to bring the situation under control. Musharraf's controversial re-election as president on 6 October 2007 by legislators whose term was ending in a few weeks; the imposition of a state of emergency on 3 November 2007 and arrest of thousands of political and civil society activists; followed by withdrawal of emergency on 16 December 2007 under intense pressure from the United States, the British Commonwealth, European Union and the people already in the streets –

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were sure signs of a government deeply in trouble. He deposed some other judges of the Supreme Court and replaced them with handpicked men. More voices within Pakistan and from outside now began to demand that Musharraf should leave and free and fair elections be held. He agreed on 27 November 2007 to give up his job as Chief of Army Staff, but insisted that he was an elected civilian president.

The Americans had been trying hard to arrange some power-sharing arrangement between him and Benazir Bhutto but her assassination on 27 December 2007 plunged Pakistan into deep chaos, especially Sindh from where the Bhuttos hailed. It was brought under control by the army being deployed in the disturbed areas with order to 'kill on sight'. The election date was moved from 8 January 2008 to 18 February 2008. Under the circumstances, when the people voted on 18 February 2008 they were expressing an opinion on either keeping or changing the government. There can be no doubt that they voted overwhelmingly for change.

The National Assembly of Pakistan comprises 342 elected members - 272 general seats and 70 reserved seats for non-Muslims (10) and women (60). The two main parties in opposition to President Musharraf – the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) now led by Asif Ali Zardari, the husband of the assassinated Benazir Bhutto, won 87 seats and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), led by Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif secured 66 seats. They will also get on a proportional basis the major share of the 70 reserved seats for non-Muslim minorities and women.

Elections were held for 268 general seats while for the rest of the four general seats they have been postponed. The results of 258 general seats have been released thus far. There was certainly a sympathy vote in favour of the PPPP in the wake of Ms Bhutto's assassination. However, even the PML-N did impressively. It undoubtedly won admiration in its home base of Punjab because Sharif remained consistently opposed to any compromise with Musharraf. Both parties were already agreed on the Charter of Democracy of 2006, which calls for a common front to restore democracy in Pakistan. Zardari and Sharif have expressed an interest in forming a coalition government. A majority of 172 is needed to form the government. Both parties will probably need to include a minor party or some independents to form a coalition government.

The situation in the provinces is also indicative of the opposition performing much better but, in the Punjab, the PML-Q has done comparatively better than what it gained for the National Assembly from the Punjab. In the crucial North-West Frontier Province, where the Taliban and pro-Al Qaeda elements have their stronghold, the people voted for the secular Awami National Party. In Baluchistan, the Baluch nationalist parties and groups boycotted the election. In sharp variance with the rest of Pakistan, the PML-Q emerged as the main winner. There will probably be coalition governments in the provinces too.

The coming weeks will be a test of nerves as well as foresight of the three key players: Musharraf, Sharif and Zardari. With regard to nerves, the contest is going to be between Sharif and Musharraf. The former refuses pointblank to accept the latter as president and has given a call for him to quit. Musharraf remains adamant that he is the elected president of Pakistan. Zardari has avoided open confrontation with Musharraf saying that the parliament will decide if Musharraf should remain president or not. He has taken the same position with regard to whether Justice Chaudhry and other judges removed from the Supreme Court will be re-instated or not: parliament will decide their fate.

On the other hand, Lahore's Daily Times of 21 February 2008 has reported that the government has re-activated a number of cases in a Swiss Court against Zardari involving the illegal stashing of 60 million Swiss francs in a bank in that country. This tactic might make Zardari fall in line in case he starts co-operating too closely with Sharif.

With regard to foresight, the issue at stake is providing Pakistan a stable government. Historically, the PPP and PML-Q have been bitter rivals, though the rivalry has little to do with ideology: it was a zero-sum game for gaining power. The only thing which has brought them together now is their common grudge against Musharraf. It may be recalled that Sharif was banned from returning to Pakistan by the Musharraf regime while Benazir had gone into self-exile to evade being put on trial for alleged corruption by her and Zardari to the tune of US\$1.5 billion. Benazir and Sharif were able to return to Pakistan some time ago only when the United States and Saudi Arabia respectively exerted intense pressure on Musharraf.

Musharraf has spoken about a government of reconciliation and his willingness to work with any government. Will this be acceptable to Sharif? Not easily at all. His party remains firmly behind him. The best thing for Musharraf to do will be to quit. But in case he is not willing to budge, a lot will depend on how Zardari plays his cards.

Whatever government finally comes into power, it will have to address in Pakistan the egregious problems of poverty, illiteracy, rising inflation and unemployment and the scourge of terrorism. Will it be able to do it in the overall framework of democracy and pluralism? It will depend on the ability of the elected representatives of the people and the government to keep the Islamists at bay. Whereas a role for Islam in the polity will always be accommodated in Pakistan, the question is always how much? As always, in a free and fair election, Pakistanis have always voted for middle parties and Islamists have never won more than five percent of the total vote. The rise of radical Islam in Pakistan has been the product of elite power games and not of some mass support from the general public.

The provinces of Baluchistan and Sindh have a long catalogue of grievances against the Punjabi-dominated central government. A federal system which enhances the economic and financial powers of the provinces will have to be considered to render secessionist threats unattractive. Under all circumstances, a return to military rule or quasi military rule will be profoundly demoralising for the people of Pakistan.

As far as Pakistan's international and regional commitments are concerned, the new government will have to convince the rest of the world that rooting out terrorism remains its priority and that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal will not fall in the hands of the Islamists. With the new Chief of Army Staff, General Kayani, now in power, co-operation between the elected representatives of the people and the military should be the normal and natural way to tackle these issues.

Pakistan's economy has been doing quite well in the last few years, recording an annual growth rate of around seven percent. The basic fiscal and financial policies needed to latch on to the growing Asian prosperity east of Pakistan are already in place. If somehow Nawaz Sharif can be brought back into parliament, he will undoubtedly have a pivotal role to play in managing the economy because he is essentially a very successful entrepreneur.

Pakistan's greatest curse has been that its leaders are prone to corruption and that too on a massive scale. Perhaps this time around, with the Internet and global networking in place, the media and civil society will be better prepared to expose such wrongdoing.

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