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The Pakistan Federal Cabinet: More of the Same or Something New?

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The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a federal, parliamentary democracy which exercises its authority within the limits imposed by Islamic injunctions. The Pakistan Constitution vests executive powers for the federation as a whole in the prime minister and his cabinet, but through a number of ordinances and amendments enacted during the dictatorships of General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf, the president has been given extraordinary powers to dismiss the prime minister and to dissolve parliament in case he is convinced that the government is not functioning properly. It will be interesting to see if the newly-elected government will seek to change this situation in favour of a strong prime minister and make the presidency a titular office. The Pakistan Parliament is bicameral. It consists of an upper house, the Senate, elected by the provincial assemblies and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and a lower house, the National Assembly, elected directly by the citizens on the basis of universal adult franchise.

After the recent elections in Pakistan on 18 February 2008, a coalition government comprising the two main winners the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), as well as the Awami Nationalist Party (ANP) Jamiyat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazlullah (JUI-F) and an independent member from FATA.

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani was sworn in by President Pervez Musharraf on 24 March 2008 in a solemn and tense ceremony as the leaders of the PPP, PML-N and ANP boycotted it. Slogans were shouted by some of the PPP leaders in favour of the assassinated Ms Benazir Bhutto. The swearing in of the federal cabinet on 31 March 2008 was even more charged with tension and anxiety as the ministers from the PML-N initially were reluctant to be sworn in by President Musharraf but later took the oath of office wearing black armbands to express their objection to him continuing in office. In any case, the formalities were completed then. There are 11 PPP, nine PML-N, two ANP, one JUI-F ministers and one minister from the independents. The distribution, according to political party and portfolios, is as follows:

- i) The ministers from the PPP are Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar (Defence); Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi (Foreign Affairs); Sherry Rehman (Information and

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Broadcasting); Qamar Zaman Kaira (Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas); Syed Khursheed Ahmed Shah (Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis); Senator Farooq H Naik (Law and Justice); Nazar Muhammad Gondal (Narcotics Control); Humayun Aziz Kurd (Population Welfare); Syed Naveed Qamar (Ports and Shipping, with additional charge of Privatisation and Investment); Najamuddin Khan (States and Frontier Regions); and Raja Pervaiz Ashraf (Water and Power).

- ii) The ministers from PML-N are Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan (Senior Minister, Communications with additional charge of Food, Agriculture and Livestock); Shahid Khaqan Abbasi (Commerce); Tehmina Daultana (Culture); Ahsan Iqbal (Education, additional charge of Minorities); Muhammad Ishaq Dar (Finance, Revenue, Economic Affairs and Statistics); Khawaja Muhammad Asif (Petroleum and Natural Resources, with additional charge of Sports); Sardar Mehtab Abbasi (Railways); Rana Tanveer Hussain (Defence Production); and Khawaja Saad Rafique (Youth Affairs, Science and Technology).
- iii) The other ministers include JUI-F's Senator Rehmatullah Kakar (Housing and Works); ANP's Haji Ghulam Ahmad Bilour (Local Governments and Rural Development); and Nawabzada Khawaja Muhammad Khan Hoti (Social Welfare, Special Education); and FATA MNA Hameedullah Jan Afridi (Environment).

The post of foreign minister has been given to PPP's Shah Mahmood Qureshi. He was one of the persons in the competition for the post of prime minister. He has almost the same background as Prime Minister Gilani in that he comes from an influential, perhaps the most influential, landowning family of Multan who are custodians of the most revered Sufi masters – Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukhne Alam – in that ancient town of southern Punjab. Qureshi is a PPP heavy weight and may have been given the foreign ministry by PPP President Asif Ali Zardari with a view to maintain a balance between these two influential families. He does not have any previous experience of foreign affairs but has been elected a member of the national assembly in the past too. He will probably maintain the policy already established by the Foreign Office of normalising relations with India and Afghanistan and maintaining good relations with China, the Arab world and the Muslim nations in general. Zardari and Sharif have, in recent times, given statements favouring increasing economic interaction with India and more people-to-people contacts through the liberalisation of visa and related matters. Also, on Kashmir, the ideas expressed by them suggest that it will not be allowed to obstruct the normalisation of ties with India. Qureshi will probably tow this line as it seems now to be anchored in the Pakistan Foreign Office as well.

The defence ministry has gone to PPP's Chaudhry Mukhtar Ahmed. He belongs to a wealthy industrial family of Lahore which has made its fortune by pioneering factory-level manufacturing of shoes. They own the Services Industries with headquarters in Gujarat, north of Lahore. Ahmed has also been steadfast member of the PPP since a long time. He too was tipped as prime minister, but in the subsequent horse-trading that followed behind closed doors, he was given the defence portfolio. Upon becoming minister, he reportedly described Musharraf as a great asset for Pakistan but has subsequently denied that he said so. He is generally considered to have good relations with Musharraf and the military establishment. He is also a friend of Zardari – both met in jail when they were charged with various financial irregularities. The defence ministry enjoys a high status as it is the link between the civilian government and the military establishment.

The finance ministry has been allotted to PML-N's Ishaq Dar from Lahore. It was expected that, since Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, belong to an industrial family and have a keen interest in promotion of commerce and production this key ministry will go to their party. Since neither of them are, at present, a member of parliament because of some legal hurdles, Dar has been given this portfolio. He is of Kashmiri descent and a relative of Nawaz Sharif. He served as Finance Minister in Nawaz Sharif's government which was toppled by General Musharraf in 1999. During that period, he distinguished himself by making export-oriented growth the cornerstone of his economic strategy. After sanctions were imposed on Pakistan when it tested nuclear devices in the end of May 1998, Dar successfully negotiated an International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue package to avert an economic crisis. That package was not able to prevent the crisis hitting Pakistan severely but it is generally recognised that those measures mitigated the impact of the sanctions. He enjoys the reputation of being business friendly and in favour of globalisation and Pakistan's greater integration into the world economy. He will certainly favour greater trade with India and can even be induced to evolve a Pakistan 'Look East' policy, if he has not been thinking of one already.

Some other important political figures in the federal cabinet are PPP's Sherry Rahman, a prominent lady journalist of Urdu-speaking origin from Karachi, a human rights activist and a close friend and aide of Benazir Bhutto. She has been assigned the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. In the last few days, some ministers from the last government, the Chief Minister of Sindh, Arbab Ghulam Rahim, and Federal Minister, Dr Sher Afghan Niazi, have been physically assaulted by angry mobs. The attack on Rahim being shown on private television channels was pulled off the air and questions have been asked if Rehman issued the orders to that effect.

Another heavy weight in the federal cabinet is PML-N's Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan (Senior Minister, Communications with additional charge of Food, Agriculture and Livestock). He hails from northern Punjab and has been an elected Member of Parliament many times from Rawalpindi district. He served as Federal Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources, and Provincial Coordinator during 1990-1993 in the government of Nawaz Sharif. Again from 1997-1999, he was Federal Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources and Special Assistant to the Prime Minister.

The PPP has its strongest hold in Sindh from where both Benazir Bhutto and Asif Zardari hail. Makhdoom Amin Rahim, custodian of a famous Sufi shrine and landlord was initially tipped as the frontrunner for the post of prime minister but Zardari overruled him probably because he enjoyed a strong position in the PPP rank and file besides being a leading member of Sindhi feudal society and could, therefore, be difficult for Zardari to control once he became prime minister. Zardari has chosen to balance the Sindhi presence in the federal cabinet by including PPP's Syed Khurshheed Ahmed Shah (Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis) and Syed Naveed Qamar (Ports and Shipping, with additional charge of Privatisation and Investment). Both are important members of the PPP and enjoy significant influence in the Sindhi feudal society.

Qamar Zaman Kaira of the PPP has been given the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs. He hails from Punjab. He is known as a hard working party worker who has helped greatly in organising the PPP in the Punjab. Although the Kashmir ministry is primarily responsible for the affairs of the Pakistani-administered Azad Kashmir, it also monitors the overall situation in the Indian-administered Kashmir. It remains to be seen what specific ideas of his own that

he will propose to solve that outstanding issue with India. Prime Minister Gilani and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh have exchanged conventional greetings and spoken to each other. The media has reported that the Indian premier is likely to visit Pakistan soon. It is very unlikely that the new cabinet will spoil its relations with India by assuming some intransigent position on Kashmir.

Given the recent history of violence and terrorism as well as the arrest of peaceful agitators against the authoritarian policies of President Musharraf from March 2007 onwards when he declared Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry non-functional, the new government will face an uphill task of establishing law and order in the country. This crucial task has been assigned to PPP's Senator Farooq H Naik who is the new Minister for Law and Justice. He is a Punjabi. He is a lawyer with very close relations with PPP's chief Zardari. He has represented Benazir Bhutto and her husband in several legal cases. He will have to bring under control the spiraling violence that has taken place recently when two former close members of the pro-Musharraf's administration, Ghulam Rahim and Afghan Niazi, were badly hit by angry mobs. There have been ugly scenes of violence in Karachi as well where nine people, six of them lawyers, have been killed in clashes between different political factions. Naik has condemned, in very strong words, the stoning to death of a man and women in the tribal areas after a self-styled Islamic Court found them guilty of adultery. He has also ordered an inquiry into the death of a Hindu worker at the hands of his Muslim co-workers at a garment factory in Karachi after a heated discussion on religion. He was accused of blasphemy and gruesomely killed by fanatical Muslims.

On the whole, the post of prime minister and other key ministries (foreign affairs, finance, defence and law and order) have been allotted to Punjabis, whose province, Punjab, is Pakistan's largest in terms of population as well as the dominant one in terms of the origins of the military and bureaucratic apparatuses. While the federal cabinet and federal governments and cabinets are now taking shape, there are rumours that Zardari may be planning to secure the prime minister post for himself but that remains to be seen. There can be no denying that serious differences exist between the two leaders, Zardari and Sharif, on the acceptance of Musharraf as president and on the restoration of the chief justice and other judges of the Supreme Court deposed by Musharraf. It is widely believed that Zardari and before him, his wife Benazir Bhutto, had already worked out a deal brokered by the United States with Musharraf on power-sharing. Zardari continues to be working on such an agenda while Sharif is adamant that Musharraf should be removed as president through legal and constitutional means, and the chief justice and other judges be put back on the benches. But both Zardari and Sharif are not at present members of parliament. Therefore, it will be interesting to see if the federal cabinet develops internal cohesion and works as one team led by an independent prime minister or it will take its cue from the party bosses.

Although suicide bombing has declined noticeably in Pakistan after the new government announced that it will seek to end terrorism but not only through military means. It will seek political solutions too and bolster such efforts with economic support to the poverty-ridden tribal areas of Pakistan from where most of the suicide bombers are recruited. The fact that the PML-N is part of the coalition government and its leader, Nawaz Sharif, has had a soft spot for conservative Islamic ideas, can mean that channels of communication with the militants can be established with greater ease and trust. Such a liaison can also mean that the extremists gain concessions on greater adherence to dogmatic Islamic law by the government. On the whole, the federal cabinet consists of urbane, modern educated individuals who would probably eschew close identification with either the left or the right.

It is, however, far from certain that the new government will survive and consolidate. The coming days and weeks will severely test its ability to govern Pakistan successfully, and if it survives, then the transition to a civilian, democratic and peace-oriented government will be strengthened.

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