

Islamabad establishment gets another chance to redeem itself

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The overwhelming electoral success of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), the PML(N) (led by former Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif), the blanking out of the London-Zionist lobby upstart Imran Khan, and the depletion of the most-powerful political party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), under the twice-ousted Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, were the highlights of the Feb. 3 elections in Pakistan. This was the fourth Pakistani general election since the death of military ruler Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, in August 1988. Three earlier polls had brought Bhutto and her party to power twice, and the PML(N), once. President Farooq Leghari, wielding the eighth amendment clause of the Pakistani Constitution, had ousted all three of these governments, long before their expiry date, on grounds of corruption.

Increasing despondency among Pakistani voters was observable as soon as the Caretaker Cabinet, headed by President Leghari, ousted the Bhutto government and announced Feb. 3, 1997, as the next election date. Leghari was a PPP stalwart who had been hand-picked for the President's post by Bhutto, whom he then turned against. Accusations of corruption against the Bhutto government, and the arrest of Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, on charges of conspiring in the assassination of her brother, Murtaza Bhutto, a few months earlier, were part of a gameplan to sideline her.

President Leghari then used an executive order to constitute the Council for Defense and National Security (CDNS) for the interim period. The council has five top civilian officers of state—the President, prime minister, and ministers for defense, foreign affairs, and finance—with four serving top generals and headed by the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee. The CDNS will reduce the prime minister's powers, while increasing that of the generals.

A transplant from London

Having made clear their intention to keep the controls firmly in their own hands, authorities within and outside of Pakistan, such as the Pakistani bureaucrats linked to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, began to influence public opinion. They promoted the choice between Imran Khan (Sir Jimmy Goldsmith's son-in-law and Pakistan's former cricket hero), and Mian Nawaz Sharif, the Zia ul-Haq protégé and head of the Ittefaq business group, the

largest in Pakistan. It was evident that President Leghari wanted Sharif to win the elections.

During the election campaign, while Bhutto was engaged in battling President Leghari, Nawaz Sharif was fighting off Imran Khan. Pakistani voters' rejection of Imran Khan was so complete that he could not garner even 10% of the votes polled. Sir Jimmy, who along with his Rothschild wife and his daughters, had landed in Lahore with the far-fetched hope of congratulating his son-in-law on the occasion of a victory, was left most disappointed.

The electoral failure of Imran Khan (widely known in South Asia as "Im the Dim"), despite an open endorsement by the caretaker prime minister, Malik Miraj Khaled, can be attributed to the following factors: Imran's marrying into the Goldsmith-Rothschild house was successfully exploited by Nawaz Sharif, and the cricket star's posturing as a "devout Muslim" while trying to avoid his "playboy" past was not bought by the electorate. The populace also distrusted Imran's sudden switch from charity—building a cancer hospital in his mother's memory—to full-fledged politics around a banner of "anti-corruption." In addition, Imran's earlier statement that his political career was launched by Hamid Gul, the former Pakistan Inter-Service Intelligence chief and contributor to the post-Soviet Afghan chaos, may, in effect, have made him lose a few more votes. His later statement that Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad is his present political mentor did not sink in with the electorate.

Tasks and problems

Having won the elections, Nawaz Sharif has little time to rest on his laurels. Given his mandate, the excuse for the next government not doing the needful is sharply reduced. The issues Nawaz Sharif will have to deal with as prime minister are:

- Pakistan is in a difficult economic mess. The nation's financial policy control, for all practical purposes, has been handed over to the World Bank-International Monetary Fund duo by the caretaker cabinet, and these international institutions are keen to push through fiscal austerity measures, regardless of political consequences.
- Ethnic violence is ripping through Pakistan's loosely woven social fabric. Shia-Sunni violence, which put neigh-

boring Iran on guard; the endless violence in Karachi between the Mohajirs, Sindhis, and PPP members; and the recent anti-Christian violence in Punjab may or may not have foreign interference, but all of this together has the potential to blow Pakistan apart.

- The complex Afghanistan situation, which may move into a different level if and when the Taliban militarily control the whole state of Afghanistan. Already, refugees, this time Tajiks and Uzbeks, are leaving their homes in fear of a fresh round of violence against them by the advancing Taliban-Pushtoon militia. In due time, Abdur Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek Jumbash-e-Milli leader, and Ahmed Shah Masood, the Tajik leader and former defense minister, are expected to leave Afghanistan and head toward Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respectively, to wage guerrilla warfare against the Taliban. Pakistan, meanwhile, has got itself too well identified with the Taliban, and, in essence, Saudi, American, and British interests in the region.

- Internally, Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted in 1993 by former President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, is obligated to use his two-thirds' National Assembly majority to constitutionally amend the eighth amendment, which has been the bane of all elected governments in Pakistan.

- Finally, by trying to do what he must do, Mian Nawaz Sharif will find out what the CDNS will stand for, and how this new coalition of Pakistan's power troika can be directed toward a meaningful goal. The first challenge, perhaps, will be for Nawaz Sharif to improve trade relations with India, and, in due course, to ease the Kashmir dispute. Beijing has already indicated that this should be the course of future Islamabad policy vis-à-vis Kashmir, and Nawaz Sharif seems to be more than willing to move in that direction. If Nawaz Sharif faces opposition from the very establishment that has allowed him to be the next prime minister, he will become a prime minister in name only.

At the same time, Nawaz Sharif should feel blessed by the timing of the elections. The Pakistani elite, dominated by the landed gentry, military, and the bureaucracy—all part of one extended family—is losing credibility within the population, as indicated by the low turnout at the polls. More important, however, are the indications that Pakistan must shift its course now: the economic disparity and economic frustration among the poor; growing unemployment, which leads to adopting criminal activities as a career; the complete breakdown of law and order; and the total discrediting of all institutions, including that of the military.

Loud voices can be heard from across the border, demanding open trade with India and even an open border. It is, therefore, no surprise that, for the first time in Pakistani electoral history, there was no anti-India campaign, and the Kashmir issue was not used to garner votes. These are the positive indicators, and Mian Nawaz Sharif must build on that for his own success.

Ecuador's cuckoo falls from the nest

by Valerie Rush

On Feb. 7, two million Ecuadorans marched in the streets against their government's embrace of so-called "free market" economics, which has slammed the population with 200-600% increases in transport, electricity, and fuel costs, the planned privatization of the nation's most vital assets, and dollarization of the economy under a British-styled "currency board." The result of this mass strike was a Congressional vote removing President Abdala Bucaram from office, paving the way for new Presidential elections early next year.

Ecuador's mass mobilization against austerity was not an Ecuadoran phenomenon at all. This same grass-roots opposition to British free-trade policies is exploding around the globe, from Hongkong to Bulgaria, from Germany to the United States, from Albania to Colombia. As the international financial system collapses further into bankruptcy, its gendarmes are intensifying their efforts to gouge living standards, in order to save their dying system. Increasingly, those heads of state not prepared to defend the interests of their own populations against these supranational interests, will roll.

Ecuador still unstable

When the Ecuadoran Congress ousted Bucaram, who is as notorious for his grotesque personal behavior as he is for his corruption, "El Loco" ("The Madman") refused to cede the Presidency, which was simultaneously being claimed by Vice President Rosalía Arteaga, and by Congressional President Fabián Alarcón. The threat of national disintegration loomed, with several provinces announcing they would secede.

Ecuador's military stepped in as the ultimate guarantor of national sovereignty, and helped to broker an agreement between Arteaga and the Congress which averted civil war, and which has, temporarily at least, given the country a new President. Through a vote in Congress of 57-2 on Feb. 11, Alarcón was installed as interim President, and Bucaram's despised austerity decrees, which had been dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), were repealed.

The country, however, remains extremely unstable.