

Pakistani Elections Complicate War Fronts

by Ramtanu Maitra

As Pakistan's parties continue their hectic consultations in search of a workable coalition for the central government, the outcome of the Oct. 10 general elections has surprised and worried the region, and beyond. Its most surprising element is the massive electoral success of the religious grouping, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a party of six religious groups cobbled together. MMA not only won 45 of 272 seats in the National Assembly, but also virtually swept the National and Provincial assembly polls in Balochistan and North West Frontier Province—two Pakistani provinces bordering war-torn Afghanistan.

As of this writing, three countries—the United States, Afghanistan and India—have put the Pakistani poll results under a microscope and are trying to figure out every little unexpected turn and twist that brought about this uncalculated outcome. So far, India's reactions indicate virtual horror; Afghanistan's, serious concerns; while the United States has chosen not to express any emotion over the poll results yet.

Musharraf Kept to Schedule

President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who seized absolute power in a bloodless coup on Oct. 12, 1999 and had promised to bring back "democracy" three years later, has certainly enhanced his credibility inside the country and in the United States, by sticking to the schedule he had promised. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the serious security problem that exists in Pakistan now.

To his credit, the polls went virtually trouble free, although two major political parties—the Pakistan People's Party, which has reincarnated itself as the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP), and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)—have accused President Musharraf of rigging the polls and making the election a "farce."

Musharraf, who got himself appointed as President of Pakistan through 2007 via a questionable "Yes-No" referendum months before the general elections, and had proposed more than 50 amendments to the 1973 Constitution, was trying to put all the ducks in a row to get the right formulation from the final poll outcome. He disallowed the PPPP leader, Benazir Bhutto, who is self-exiled in London and Dubai, from contesting the polls because of her conviction *in absentia* of

criminal charges by Pakistani courts; and also barred Mian Nawaz Sharif, who is exiled to Saudi Arabia till 2010. Each had twice been prime minister of Pakistan. Musharraf also amended the Constitution so that only college graduates could contest the polls. This automatically eliminated 85% of Pakistan's population from becoming candidates.

In addition, General Musharraf split the PML-N to form the Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid-e-Azam (PML-Q), which came to be known as the "King's Party." He also blessed the formation of the religious party, MMA, brought about with the help of a section of Pakistan's military, which had long developed close contacts with the Islamic orthodox groupings. These Islamic groups had helped the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to indoctrinate many Afghans in their madrassas, or religious schools, and thus to form the anchor of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. These religious groups also played a major role in fomenting terrorism inside the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir, and they did so with the help of the Pakistani military.

President Musharraf's expectations that his PML-Q would be able to secure an absolute majority by winning at least 137 seats, did not, however, materialize. PML-Q ended up with 77 seats, followed by the PPPP with 63. PML-N, which was drained of its leaders who joined the "King's Party," won only 14 seats. MMA, on the other hand, not expected to win more than 20 contests, emerged as the third largest political party with 45 Assembly seats. The same grouping of religious parties had won only 4 seats in the 1996 elections, in which the PML-N had secured almost two-thirds of the National Assembly seats.

The outcome of the poll results ensured that formation of a government will be an arduous task. It is also a certainty that both President Musharraf and the Pakistani military will be involved in putting together a coalition. Such an agreement between these disparate groups can be ensured only through a series of give-and-takes. This is what is in progress now.

What Is the Religious Party?

From the noises one hears, the differences between the top three vote-getters are not difficult to fathom, but seemingly difficult to reconcile. PML-Q, being the King's Party, will sign on the dotted line under Islamabad's orders. The PPPP, in contrast, has a list of grievances, which must be remedied. These are, in their order of priorities: Bhutto must be given free passage to Pakistan and the sentences against her must be dropped; the 1973 Constitution must be upheld and no new Constitution would be endorsed; Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who is languishing in Pakistani jails on corruption charges, must be released; and the U.S. forces, who are now based in Pakistan, must leave. It is evident that the PPPP will drop its last demand quickly. That one is now used as a negotiating tool.

MMA, which is a grouping of pro-Taliban and pro-

orthodox Islamic religious groups, has single-item agenda as of now, which is the removal of the U.S. troops from Pakistan. MMA is led by three angry Pashtuns (the same ethnic group dominant in southern and central Afghanistan—Qazi Hussain Ahmed of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI); Maulana Fazlur Rehman of Jamiatul Ulema-e-Pakistan-Fazlur (JUI-F); and Maulana Samiul Haq of Jamiatul Ulema-e-Pakistan-Samiul (JUI-S).

What is interesting to note is that the MMA leaders have been around for a while and are quite conversant with the Pakistani political system. Qazi Hussain Ahmed, for instance, is a Pashtun based in Punjab. He raises the temperature of the masses in a measured fashion. One of his claims to fame is that it was he who had won the Jamaat referendum against the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in the late 1990s. The fact that his party's links with banned terrorist groups—Hizbul Mujahideen and Al-Badr—faded over time, gave him a “non-terrorist” democratic status, and he has even visited the United States. He calls President Musharraf a “security risk,” has appealed for his removal, and has attacked his private life.

During the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, JUI-F was on the outer fringes, since the Pakistani military was directly involved in helping Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Afghan mujahideen leader backed by the United States, as an option in Afghanistan. JUI-F was not strong, and the Deobandi sectarian militant group, Sipah-e-Sahaba, was weak in Punjab. JUI-F always had a base in Balochistan and in the Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan.

Maulana Fazlur played on the rift between Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s. In return, the PPP government inducted him into the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly and gave his men a few ambassadorial jobs in Africa. His angry phase came in the mid-1990s, when the Taliban appeared on the scene, and the ISI began to back the Deobandis as the surrogate army for its proxy war in the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir. At the time, Maulana Fazlur developed a strong nexus with a Karachi seminary. His members from this seminary, Sipah-e-Sahaba, began travelling to Afghanistan as trainee warriors, and for the first time, the JUI-F started getting powerful in the province of Punjab.

The third important leader is Maulana Samiul Haq of JUI-S. Haq was also sidelined during the Afghan war. He was put in the Senate as an “expert” by the late Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Haq because of his Akora Khattak Haqqaniya seminary. His angry statements in the press promised a tough orthodox society for Pakistan, especially for women, whom he does not want to see without “burkha” in public and working in tandem with men.

Maulana Samiul became important to the Afghans after it was revealed that some of his former seminarians became the core around the top Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. Afghan President Hamid Karzai claims the Taliban is

not the religious group of the Afghans, but was sent to Kandahar from the Deobandi seminaries of Pakistan. The fact remains that Maulana Samiul Haq, along with Karachi's Mufti Shamzai, benefitted immensely from the rise of the Taliban. It is said that when Mullah Mohammad Omar sent invitations to Pakistani clerics to come over to Kandahar, it was Maulana Samiul Haq who was in-charge of vetting those invitees.

Karzai Government Concerned

Reactions from India and Afghanistan following the polls are centered around the success of the MMA and the emergence of three Pashtun maulvis as major players in Pakistan's political process. Afghan President Hamid Karzai, while attending the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) conference in Istanbul on Oct. 14, said—without naming either the MMA or Pakistan—that he is concerned about the developments and would like to host a conference of neighboring countries to agree to stop “extremist” groups operating across the long and remote borders. Both Afghanistan and the United States claim that the Taliban and al-Qaeda members, who had escaped the U.S. dragnet spread in Afghanistan, are operating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan borders while being based in Pakistan's tribal areas. They also claim that these groups pose a threat to the Karzai government in Kabul.

The Indian response is almost identical, although it has less to do with Afghanistan than with the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir. New Delhi is concerned that with the Pakistani ISI's help, the MMA will rebuild the Taliban-al-Qaeda combo, and could regain control of Afghanistan. India is worried about the fact that the MMA, now a fast-growing political force inside Pakistan, will openly call for a harsher Pakistani policy vis-à-vis India. And it is concerned that with the MMA on the scene, the cross-border terrorism, to destabilize the border areas in India, will be an accepted policy.

In contrast, Washington has remained silent. Having congratulated President Musharraf for holding the elections in time, the United States is also aware, as President Karzai is, that the MMA's electoral victory in the adjoining province—using a campaign that called for removal of U.S. troops and U.S. bases from Pakistan—will make the war against terrorism more difficult, and will also make it difficult to build up Pakistan to play a role in Central Asia on behalf of the United States. If the United States plunges into a war in the Middle East, as seems likely, a Pakistan dominated by the MMA will be anti-U.S.A.

What could bother Washington more, is that it has not much more to offer to Islamabad. It has already provided \$2 billion of financial help and has promised another \$1 billion. Washington has also started military hardware sales to Pakistan after an absence of four years. The United States is now involved on Pakistani soil in a three week-long military exercise with the Pakistani army for the first time since 1997.