

Pakistan's Elections: Prospects for the Future

by Ramtanu Maitra

Defying most of the doomsayers' gloomy predictions, Pakistan's elections took place on Feb. 18, in a relatively orderly fashion, and the results indicate that no mass-scale vote rigging was done. Although less than 40% of the electorate exercised their franchise, the poll results can still be considered as a reflection of national opinion.

As was expected, the ruling parties PML (Q) and the ensemble of six Islamic parties, MMA, suffered a crushing defeat, winning only 43 of the 268 National Assembly seats. By contrast, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Asif Ali Zardari, following the assassination of his wife, Benazir Bhutto, on Dec. 27, 2007, and the PML (N), under the leadership of Mian Nawaz Sharif, together won 154 seats. While talks are in progress on the formation of a government, it is certain that these two largest parties will form an alliance, bringing under their fold some smaller parties and independents. In all likelihood, the post-electoral alliance will have a significant majority in the National Assembly, but will not have the two-thirds majority which would allow the government to impeach the President, or change the Constitution.

While the general pre-election reading on how the major political parties would fare, if there were no widespread rigging of votes, came out close to the mark, it must be noted that the PPP (the parliamentary version of this party is PPPP) did not secure the so-called sympathy votes expected because of the assassination of Bhutto only eight weeks before the elections were held. As a result, the PPP's tally, though the highest among the parties, was a modest 88 out of 268. The PPP did very well in Sindh, the ancestral land and home of the Bhutto family, but not so well in Punjab, where the PML (N) rules the roost, particularly in the urban areas. In Rawalpindi, where Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, the PPP lost to a PML (N) candidate.

If the PPP "sweep," as some Pakistani analysts had pre-

dicted, did not occur, what surprised Pakistanis is the virtual political demolition of the MMA in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), bordering Afghanistan. In 2002, the MMA had 60 National Assembly seats, most of them from the NWFP, and the alliance also ruled the province. But this time around, its haul is only five seats. The MMA was swept aside by the Awami National Party (ANP), an old NWFP powerhouse that was accused by Washington, during the Cold War days, of being pro-Soviet. ANP has no religious pretensions and is considered a liberal party that opposes the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the rise of Islamic militancy in Pakistan, and President Musharraf's close ties with the United States. In other words, the small percentage of ethnic Pushtuns who came out to vote on Feb. 18 sent a strong message to both Washington and Islamabad.

Referendum Against Musharraf

There is no question that the major opposition parties ran this election as a referendum against President Pervez Musharraf. His support has declined, particularly since the sacking of Pakistan's Supreme Court Chief Justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, in May, which coalesced the educated, urban and pro-West Pakistanis against Musharraf. These were the ones who were earlier a strong support base for Musharraf, a secular leader, and were opponents of Islamic militant groups. The July raid on the Islamabad-based Lal Masjid, which allegedly killed more than a thousand madrassa students—boys and girls—along with other Islamic zealots who had assembled there, propelled the anti-West Islamic militants openly against President Musharraf and the Army.

The failure of the PML (Q) and the MMA in the 2008 elections can be directly attributed to Musharraf's failure to maintain the alliance base which he had had since he seized power from the PML (N) in a bloodless coup on Aug. 12, 1999, which



he lost some months ago. Musharraf’s failure, and his subsequent weakening, in turn, could be attributed to the United States and the West—the “mother of all problems” today in Pakistan. The invasion of Afghanistan by the United States in the Winter of 2001; President Musharraf’s active participation in the war on terror, which was directed against some Pakistani citizens as well; killing and more killing of Pushtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), bordering eastern and southeastern Afghanistan, by Musharraf’s allies in the West; and the violence that was unleashed in Pakistan by the Islamic militants changed Musharraf from a leader to a survivor. It was evident that in the Feb. 18 elections, even if Musharraf had organized massive vote rigging to bring home his old allies—the PML (Q) and MMA—and defeat the PPP and PML (N), the Pakistani Army under Gen. Ashraf Kayani would have ignored Musharraf’s request and, possibly, would have removed him.

It is also evident from the statements issued by such powerful former Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Army chiefs as Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul and Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg, particularly since the Lal Masjid raid, that the Army was getting increasingly uncomfortable with the law-and-order situation that has developed within Pakistan due to the Washington-directed policy adopted by President Musharraf. Nobody could have confidence in the Pakistan government, when the most secured places of the Pakistani Army and Special Forces HQ became

accessible to suicide bombers, causing the deaths of many soldiers and officers since last July. The Pakistani Army, the only institution on which the majority of Pakistanis depend in times of crises, has been weakened by Musharraf and his Western allies, and it is up to General Kayani to rebuild it.

What To Expect in the Coming Days

The situation remains so volatile that the most horrendous things can happen at any time. To begin with, the victory of the ANP, a liberal democratic party, in the NWFP, may quickly consolidate the militants, many of whom are working toward separating the NWFP, FATA, and Baluchistan from Pakistan. The only way they can assert their presence is through raw violence. It would be unwise for Islamabad, and Rawalpindi (Pakistan’s Army, that is), to assume that the plan for breaking up Pakistan, which is very much on London’s and “Londonistan’s” (London-harbored Islamic militants) agenda, will be given a respite, because of what happened in the 2008 elections.

According to a well-known Indian analyst, the Islamic militants hate the ANP with a vengeance. There are a number of reasons for this, besides the fact that the ANP is secular and smells of leftist politics. One reason is that the ANP allegedly cooperated with the Soviet Union’s puppet Afghan dictator, Mohammad Najibullah, during the early 1990s, after the Red Army had hightailed it out of Afghanistan in the Summer of 1989. On record, ANP has on its agenda changing the name of the province from NWFP to Pukhtoonkhwa, and yet-to-be-defined provincial autonomy. ANP may choose to push these policies because it could thus garner support of the local Pushtuns, and could prevent vicious attacks from the Islamic militants. The ANP gambit may not materialize, since it will be a very minor partner in the government, with fewer than ten elected members.

What may cause a serious problem within the government is the matter of Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan and against al-Qaeda. Both the PML (N) and the ANP are against allowing U.S. troops to operate on Pakistani territory, or allowing U.S. planes to bomb suspected terrorist camps in Pakistan. The PML (N) has already sought clarification of the implications of the U.S. declaring Pakistan a non-NATO ally. According to at least one analyst, this could mean that the PML (N) is seeking a review of the present policy, under which supplies for NATO troops in Afghanistan are allowed to be unloaded at the port of Karachi, and moved to Afghanistan by road through Pakistani territory. In addition, the PML (N) and the ANP want the economic and social development of the FATA to be done according to a plan to be drawn up by Pakistan, and not by the U.S. State Department or the Pentagon.

On the other hand, the PPP’s position on these issues is in

sync with both President Musharraf and Washington. Benazir Bhutto was on record saying she would allow the Americans to go into the FATA to eliminate the Islamic militants. The PPP also has a very strong anti-madrassa position, more or less opposite to the views of the PML (N) on the issue.

The coming coalition government in Islamabad will also have other contradictions—some of them consequential in the short term, while others may become aggravated over time. For instance, Afghan President Hamid Karzai is already in touch with PPP leader Asif Zardari. Since the PPP calls for allowing American troops to get into the FATA to eliminate al-Qaeda and other militants, helping Kabul in the process, Kar-

zai would like to build a strong bridge with the PPP. This may not go over well with PML (N) supremo, Nawaz Sharif, who strongly opposes any American intervention in the FATA.

Another question is, what will be the role of the Saudi royal household in the coming days, to restrain Nawaz Sharif in his campaign to remove President Musharraf? This issue is expected to linger as a festering wound. The Saudis are aware that Washington has not abandoned Musharraf yet, although the Saudi-backed Sharif has. How the Saudis will resolve this contradiction, time will tell.

The Real Problem

The real issue that would continue to weaken and drain Pakistan, and its Army, however, is the presence of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan. As long as foreign occupying forces stay there, the Afghans will fight back, and foreign troops will get no respite. To believe for even a single moment that the foreign troops will be able to “subdue” the Afghans for good, is ignorance and naivety rolled into one. Afghans, as well as foreign Islamic militants who have assembled along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to bleed the foreign troops through nicks and cuts, as well as suicide bombs, perceive that the United States has limited staying power. It could be 2008, or 2009, when the foreign troops would be able to justify their departure from Afghanistan. Till such time, the Afghan-Push-tuns would carry on.

What could possibly be Islamabad’s role in the future in this conflict? President Musharraf stuck Pakistan’s neck out on behalf of the foreign occupying troops, and got his own country into serious law-and-order trouble. This trouble is growing, and there is every reason to believe that a full-fledged secessionist movement, which was only simmering before, may have begun to boil, or is about to.

Pakistan has a new government and a new Chief of Armed Services (COAS). Neither the government to be formed, nor the COAS is party to the Bush-Musharraf deal. It would be unlikely that the new power centers of Pakistan, with Musharraf virtually out of the loop, believe that they will have to make a similar commitment to America’s woes—i.e., Afghanistan—as Musharraf made. If they manage to stave off Washington’s pressure on that, Pakistan’s law-and-order situation may improve.

There is a positive note on that issue. Even before the government has been formed, the two major parties, PPP and the PML (N), following their leaders’ discussions, said on Feb. 19 that they would take a new approach to fighting Islamic militants, by pursuing more dialogue than military confrontation. There is no question that this decision will be strongly endorsed by the Army. However, the key will be to keep the foreign occupying forces, and their demands, off the agenda during this discussion.

But what would change the situation significantly is telling the Americans, and the Europeans, to leave Afghanistan, or, at least to make arrangements to leave.

Pakistan’s Major Parties

Awami National Party (ANP): Led by Asfandiyar Wali Khan. A secular, leftist party based in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP); has strong support among ethnic Pushtuns. Won 10 seats in the 2008 National Assembly (NA). Had no seat in the previous NA.

Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA): A coalition of six Islamic parties headed by Qazi Hussain Ahmed. Wants to make Pakistan an Islamic state. Was a ruling party, with the PML (Q), prior to the recent election, in which it won only five seats.

Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM): A party of Indian Muslims settled in the large cities of Sindh, Pakistan after the 1947 partition of India. A political rival of PPP, MQM is led by Altaf Hussain, from his self-imposed exile in the U.K. Has been supportive of all governments opposed to the PPP. Won 19 seats.

Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N): The largest faction of the PML. Led by Nawaz Sharif, who returned a few months ago from Saudi Arabia, where he was exiled after being ousted in a 1999 coup led by Gen. Pervez Musharraf. Opposes operation of U.S. troops in Pakistan. PML (N), created by the Pakistani Army in 1989 to oppose Benazir Bhutto’s PPP, has strong links to the Army. Won 66 seats.

Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q): Formed under guidance from Musharraf in 2001, and ruled with the MMA until the recent election. Won 38 seats.

Pakistan People’s Party (PPP): Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, chairman; Asif Ali Zardani, co-chairman. The party of the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and late Benazir Bhutto, was founded in Sindh in the late-1960s. Won 88 seats.

Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI): Headed by the cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan. Boycotted the 2008 election.