



Democratic Rebirth in Pakistan

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At first sight, there is much to celebrate in Pakistan's elections this month. The fact that the elections took place at all is heartening. Spiraling internal violence, especially in the tribal areas in the north west of the country, and the murder of the leading contender for Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, on December 27th, created a climate in which many felt elections would be impossible. Perhaps capitalizing on this sentiment, the military regime of President Musharraf experienced several spasms of authoritarianism in the run-up to the elections, clamping down on the media and the judiciary and initially vacillating over how long the return of democracy could be postponed.

However, under serious pressure from the democratic world and particularly from the US, for whom Musharraf has been such a key ally

in the War on Terror, the President of Pakistan stuck to the script and elections were held on February 18th as promised. This was after their postponement in January in the immediate aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's death. Initial indications suggest that secular, anti-Musharraf parties have taken the majority of the vote and will be able to form a new coalition government.

In many areas, Islamist militants had done their utmost to create a fear of murderous violence and to discourage people from going to the polls. Suicide bombings, which have become an all-too regular feature of the security situation in parts of northern and western Pakistan since 2003, have continued at a rate of roughly one per week. Most of these are generally directed at the army and police, but in the immediate run up to the elections, two political ral-

lies by the secular Awami National Party (ANP) and one by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in the Pashtun tribal belt, were targeted by suicide bombers. More than 75 were killed and hundreds injured. Some of these were parliamentary candidates in the elections.¹

One of the leading militant groups in the northwest, the Tehrik-e Taliban-e Pakistan (TTP), led by Baitullah Mehsud and thought to be responsible for dozens of suicide attacks in Pakistan, made it clear before the elections that it did not support the democratic process². At the same time, Mehsud has been at great pains recently to claim that he was not responsible for Bhutto's murder in December, in response to the government laying responsibility firmly at the feet of his militants³. This may have led Mehsud to decide on a path of political expediency and keep his militants confined to barracks on election day itself.

In other areas of the northwest, militant leaders such as Haji Mangal Bagh of Lashkar-e Islam had directed their ire at the inclusion of women in the democratic process, and warned that "dire consequences" would face those who "allowed their women to vote". In the Darra Adamkhel area, posters had appeared on walls warning of suicide attacks if women turned out to vote⁴.

As a result of this, and combined with a boycott of the elections by some Islamic parties such as the Jamaat-i Islami, turnout was very low in several parts of the North West

Frontier Province (NWFP) and comprised very few, or in some cases no women. However, in many areas, women did turn out to vote, and in districts of South Waziristan and some neighbouring areas, they were doing so for the first time in history. The symbolic significance for this in terms of the spread of democracy in the face of Islamist militancy and fundamentalism cannot be overestimated.

In general terms, the elections followed the pattern of the few relatively free and fair elections in Pakistan's past history (notably those of 1970, and 1988, both of which followed periods of military rule) whereby Islamic parties were roundly rejected by the electorate in favour of mainstream secular parties, whether they be national parties such as the PPP and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz group: PML-N) or parties with a regional power base and agenda such as the ANP in the Pashtun areas and the Muttaheda Qaumi Movement (MQM) in urban districts of the southern Sindh Province such as Karachi. This is a significant development, as the Islamic parties have latterly enjoyed a period of power in the provincial assemblies of NWFP and Baluchistan provinces in the shape of the Muttaheda Majlis-i Amal (MMA) alliance of Islamic parties. The MMA made great gains in the parliamentary elections of 2002, which were held under the Musharraf regime and were condemned by the EU as "seriously flawed"⁵. It is significant that, following a period of real political power in northern and western

parts of Pakistan, the electorate are registering a resounding disaffection with their rule.

This reflects findings of opinion polls conducted in Pakistan in the period leading up to the elections, such as that of the US-based International Republican Institute, which indicated that 73 percent of Pakistanis agreed that religious extremism was a serious problem, and that 65 percent felt that the presence of Al Qaeda and Taliban in the country was damaging⁶. While Jamaat-i Islami and some other members of the MMA boycotted the elections altogether, some Islamic parties such as the Jamaat-i Ulama-i Islam of Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F) did contest in many seats. Fazlur Rehman is widely credited with being the political conduit to "Pakistan Taliban" militants, and has personally brokered a number of peace agreements between militants and the government in the north west. A hardline exponent of extreme Salafist ideals, Rehman faced the humiliation in the elections of being routed in his home seat in Dera Ismail Khan by the PPP candidate, as did a number of his colleagues across the region (although Rehman did win in the district of Bannu). Overall, the MMA appears to have secured only 7 National Assembly seats out of a total of 342, all of them in NWFP and Baluchistan.

The main party to benefit from the electoral misfortunes of the MMA in the north west is the ANP, led by Asfandyar Wali Khan. Initial indications are that it won 14 National Assembly seats in the NWFP, and

returned to its former dominance in the region's most significant urban centre, Peshawar, and numerous other districts. In general terms, the ANP is a left-of-centre, secular party, which believes in full parliamentary democracy and supports the struggle against Islamist militancy in the country. It also has a strong Pashtun nationalist heritage and policies, which could work in two ways. On the one hand, calls for greater regional autonomy and identity within a Pakistani structure could act as a useful counterbalance to fundamentalist Islamic expressions of identity in the region. On the other hand, Pashtun nationalist sentiments could cause friction with neighbouring Afghanistan, many of whose citizens are also Pashtun, and could lead to disagreements in the longer term with coalition partners such as the PML-N on priorities for the new government.

In Sindh, and particularly in Pakistan's largest city, Karachi, the Mutaheda Qaumi Movement (MQM) headed by Altaf Hussain, has proved itself once again to be the dominant electoral force among the Urdu-speaking "Mohajir" community. Although confined politically to Karachi and its environs, the size of the city is such that the MQM has emerged as the fourth largest party in the National Assembly in terms of seats. This will make it an important target for coalition talks. The MQM has an explosive past in its relationship with the PPP, having become embroiled in serious sectarian conflict during Benazir Bhutto's premiership in the period 1988-1990, which added to her downfall by

causing repeated deployments of the military in Karachi to restore order. More latterly it has also been seen as a supporter of Musharraf's military regime, mainly for reasons of being bitterly opposed to the growth of Islamist extremism in Pakistan and thus a strong supporter of Musharraf's counter-terrorism policies⁷. A coalition with the PPP and PML-N will therefore be complicated, but political expediency and the value of a grand secular coalition is likely to win the day.

In Punjab, Nawaz Sharif's home territory, the PML-N performed strongly. The co-chairman of the PPP, Asif Ali Zardari, and Nawaz Sharif have both been expressing conciliatory words since the election, with the former referring to the latter publicly as "my friend"⁸. Credit goes to the husband of Benazir for convincing Nawaz to contest the elections rather than boycott them, as had been his earlier instinct. Nawaz, meanwhile, has been vocal about the possibility of impeaching President Musharraf and removing him from office. Nawaz and Musharraf have a particularly difficult history. Not only did the military leader remove him from office and ensure he was exiled to Saudi Arabia in 1999, but he also turned Nawaz's return to Pakistan in September of last year into a farce by forcibly sending him straight back into exile after getting little further than the airport terminal building⁹. Zardari may yet have to use his persuasive powers further if it becomes expedient for the President to remain in place for the time being.

For his part, Musharraf has been bullish about remaining in the post to which he was re-elected almost unanimously in October 2007. The Supreme Court was due to rule on the matter in November, but Musharraf controversially suspended the court by re-imposing a State of Emergency on 3 November and putting in place a Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO). One of the first things that should happen with a full return to democracy is the removal of the PCO, the re-establishing of the Supreme Court and completion of their deliberations on whether Musharraf can remain President under the Constitution. A complicating factor is the element of influence being applied by the US and Britain in particular to keep Musharraf in place to ensure stability and continuity in the War on Terror, of which Musharraf has been such a critical supporter¹⁰. The US has made no secret of its main priority following the elections. US State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack noted on the day after the elections:

"We are going to continue our work with President Musharraf and whatever that new government may be on goals of our national interests.....We have a deep national interest in fighting violent extremists, breaking up those terrorist cells that may either operate from or from time to time operate within Pakistani territory."¹¹

This factor will probably remain Musharraf's trump card for now,

and will ensure that the military and the massive Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, can feel content with arrangements and remain in the political background for the time being. For Zardari, the issue is complicated by the fact that Musharraf struck a deal with his wife last year for outstanding corruption charges against Zardari, dating back to Benazir's time in office in the 1990s, to be dropped. This may also mean that Zardari will wish a new government to work with Musharraf in place and not unpick the deals and arrangements that were put in place in the twilight of the President's military regime last year.

Many of Pakistan's previous elections have been seriously flawed in terms of rigging and manipulation, notably those of 1990 in which Benazir Bhutto was unseated in favour of Nawaz Sharif's PML party¹². Zardari claimed the latest elections had involved "massive pre-election and election-day rigging"¹³, but the general view from EU and US election observers were that they were generally free and fair, despite problems in some areas in the shape of intimidation of women voters, and administrative errors on voting registers¹⁴. The chief of the EU monitoring mission, which was the largest foreign monitoring contingent in the country during the elections, praised the "courageous commitment to the democratic process by voters, candidates and election staff...under challenging security conditions"¹⁵. In summary, the results can be taken to be a fair reflection of the electorate's desires.

The result is that the PPP and PML-N have enough votes to form a government in coalition, together with regional parties such as the ANP and MQM. The current favourite for Prime Minister is PPP co-chairman Makhdoom Amin Fahim, an experienced minister who served under both Benazir Bhutto and her father Zulfikar in the 1970s¹⁶. Zardari has expressed some inspiring sentiments about the coalition:

It is the intent of the Pakistan People's Party to form a broad-based, democratic, liberal government - an umbrella of reconciliation and consensus We have seen progress on education, health and women's rights stopped and reversed. Now is the time for miracles in Pakistan.¹⁷

Such lofty sentiments, coupled with a mention of everyday issues relating to Pakistan's economy and society, offer encouraging portents. There is much about which to rejoice in Pakistan's apparently emphatic return to democracy after another long period of military rule. But there is also a need for caution. Coalitions assembled for single-issue reasons (such as merely opposition to what has gone before) can often falter as the normal business of governing gets underway. As described, the regional elements of the coalition such as the MQM and ANP will have particular issues and policies of their own which may not stack up well in the priority lists of the big two parties, the PPP and PML-N. The last period in which military rule ended with the restora-

tion of democracy in Pakistan, namely the period after General Zia's rule in the 1980s, has parallels with today. In 1988, Bhutto's electoral triumph was slightly tempered by the fact she did not win an outright majority and had to form a coalition with parties such as the MQM. Power struggles quickly ensued and the period transpired to be one of considerable political infighting and a serious erosion of law and order in many parts of the country. In the 2008 elections, the balance is more evenly struck between the PPP and the PML-N, but red, the peace, predictably, did not last long. Just a few days after the elections, bombing has resumed in the tribal areas, as a wedding party apparently mistaken for a military vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb in the Swat district, killing 13 people¹⁸. It is clear that Islamist militancy in Pakistan, and particularly in the tribal zone of the Pashtun northwest, will continue apace and encourage speculation about the risk of Pakistan becoming a "failed

the same risk of political fissures opening up and their impact on security on the ground are clearly present.

Given its preoccupation with the counter-terrorism issue, this is probably why the US in particular has been somewhat circumspect in its commentary on Pakistan's latest return to democracy. 2008 is different from 1988 in that the threat of Islamist terrorism is much greater and much more serious. While the elections themselves proved to be more peaceful than many had feared¹⁹. One of the most pressing challenges for the country, whether under military or civilian rule, will be to follow an effective path in countering the Islamist militant threat. Aside from such gloomy prospects however, the immediate task must be to congratulate Pakistan and its people for holding firm in the face of such threats and ensuring a return to democracy.

¹ Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (11 February 2008). *Pakistan suicide bomber kills 25 people*; (12 February 2008). *Pakistan suicide bomber kills 10 people*; The Nation (17 February 2008). *Bomber strikes PPP poll rally*: <http://www.nation.com.pk/daily/feb-2008/17/index2.php> accessed 23 February 2008

² Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (14 February 2008). *Militant group says it will not target Pakistan election*.

³ Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (15 February 2008). *Pakistani militant group leader sends delegation to Bhutto's husband*.

⁴ Dawn Internet Edition (19 February 2008). *Women stopped from voting in several parts of NWFP*. <http://www.dawn.com/2008/02/19/top7.htm> accessed 19 February 2008

⁵ Ahmed Rashid (14 October 2002). *EU condemns "flawed" Pakistan elections*. The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2002/10/14/wpak14.xml> accessed 23 February 2008

⁶ Moderate Observer (14 February 2008). *Analysis: Pakistan elections set to sideline Islamic extremists*. <http://moderate.wordpress.com/2008/02/14/analysis-pakistan-elections-set-to-sideline-islamic-extremists.htm>, accessed 18 February 2008

⁷ Julian Richards (2007). *An Uncertain Voice: the MQM in Pakistan's political scene*. Bradford, Pakistan Security Research Unit, Brief number 11, 26 April 2007, para 3. See <http://spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/download/attachments/748/Brief11finalised1.pdf>

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- ⁸ Asif Ali Zardari (20 February 2008). *Pakistan election dictates a new day*. Chicago Tribune: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-oped0220pakistanfeb20,1,5028149.story> accessed 20 February 2008
- ⁹ Declan Walsh (10 September 2007). *Sharif deported on return to Pakistan*. The Guardian: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/sep/10/pakistan.declanwalsh2> accessed 23 February 2008
- ¹⁰ Raja Asghar (23 February 2008). *Pressure on Asif, Nawaz to work with president*. Dawn: <http://www.dawn.com/2008/02/23/top1.htm> accessed 23 February 2008
- ¹¹ Anwar Iqbal (20 February 2008). *US says it will continue to work with Musharraf*. Dawn: <http://www.dawn.com/2008/02/20/top5.htm> accessed 20 February 2008
- ¹² Globalsecurity.org (2005). *Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence*. From <http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world.pakistan/isi.htm>, accessed 14 October 2006, para 13.
- ¹³ Zardari, Chicago Tribune, *ibid*
- ¹⁴ Robin McDowell (20 February 2008). *Monitors: no rigging in election*. Seattle Post-Intelligencer: http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/1104ap_pakistan_election.html accessed 20 February 2008
- ¹⁵ McDowell, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, *ibid*
- ¹⁶ Jeremy Page and Zahid Hussain (19 February 2008). *Pakistan celebrates a final end to military rule – but what next?* The Times Online: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3387244.ece> accessed 18 February 2008
- ¹⁷ Zardari, Chicago Tribune, *ibid*
- ¹⁸ Hameedullah Khan (23 February 2008). *Bride among 13 killed in Matta blast*. Dawn: <http://www.dawn.com/2008/02/23/top11.htm> accessed 23 February 2008
- ¹⁹ See for example Jonathan Paris (4 February 2008). *How stable is Pakistan?* BESA Center for Strategic Studies, Perspectives 37, para 5. <http://www.biu.ac.il/Besa/perspectives37.html> accessed 23 February 2008