

Report

Many Players, New Tools in Pakistani Elections

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The Pakistani general elections scheduled for 11 May 2013 are a rather crucial event, being the first since Pakistan's independence in 1947. They will be held after the completion of the democratically-elected government's term without overthrow. Thus, for the first time in Pakistan's history, one democratically-elected government will replace another.

The dissolution of democratic governments is not unfamiliar to Pakistan's history, usually followed by replacement with undemocratic governments that eventually oversee elections. This time around, a transitional non-politicised authority will oversee the elections. This will enhance democracy in Pakistan and the role of the judiciary, especially considering the announcement of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry that the judiciary had played a critical role in supporting the government to complete its term without any interference. The arrest of Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's former military ruler, on charges of treason was another milestone in the democratic process, pushing back its military rivals in the game of troika politics in Pakistan.

The election is also historic because, for the first time, it is being contested in a multi-channel and large-scale media space that includes social media and dozens of Pakistani television channels allowing candidates and voters to freely express themselves and their views.

Political leaders from traditional parties joined Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf ("The Pakistan Movement for Justice," PTI) founded by former cricket legend Imran Khan, who has become a robust candidate in the election race. Furthermore, the parties and people that boycotted the previous elections are participating, thus providing new options and choices for voters.

The election commission's structure also played a role in making these elections remarkable. It comprises five members with good reputation in their respective districts and with proven objectivity. The commission is entrusted the making of all decisions relating to the elections; in the past, decisions and powers were granted solely to the commission head.

Prospects for Traditional Political Powers

Among the traditional parties in Pakistan, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led jointly by Bilawal Zardari, son of the late Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari, incumbent president of Pakistan and Bhutto's husband, stands out. Another prominent traditional party is the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) led by Nawaz Sharif. However, the chances of success for the PPP and its ally, the Awami National Party (also known as the "Popular National Party," ANP), which runs the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (Peshawar), are significantly diminishing with the completion of the government's five-year term in power. Their chances are also reduced because of the decline of public services. This includes the provision of energy – with lengthy power and gas failures as well as a deteriorating security condition – which was a main issue on the PPP's agenda and which it promised to address in 2008, and the worsening economic conditions in general. There is no longer a scapegoat to blame for these failures as was the case when governments were overthrown.

The PPP is obliged to answer its supporters and explain its weak political performance and service delivery rather than present a new manifesto. It also lacks a charismatic political leader as the martyr myth that the PPP had relied on before – after the deaths of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Shahnawaz Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto – has died out. The myth does not attract voters as it had in the past. Despite these obstacles, it is likely that the PPP will dominate the ballots in its traditional stronghold, the province of Sindh, especially in Karachi.

The PML – which has run the largest of the four provinces, Punjab, for the past five years – may find its vote bank being shattered because of the rise of PTI or the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which boycotted the 2008 elections but decided to run this year. In 2008, JI's supporters voted for PML, which has become obliged to coordinate or agree

with the JI on electoral districts as well as challenge Imran Khan who is being cast as a right-wing conservative, just as Sharif has been. Therefore, PTI will live on the PML's votes. That is why Shahbaz Sharif, Nawaz's brother, declared, with resentment of Khan's rise in Punjab, that Khan uses Zardari's language.

Sharif's PML enjoys a good reputation in light of the PPP's weakness. It has a single leader who is more charismatic than that of the PPP, giving it a better chance of winning the elections. The PML's most significant success will most likely be in Punjab, the largest Pakistani province, despite Khan's competition. It might also achieve some success in Pakhtunkhwa (Peshawar) and Balochistan, in cooperation with the JI and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Assembly of Islamic Clerics) led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Balochi nationalist parties.

It seems the PPP's ally, the *Mohajir Qaumi* Movement (MQM), will remain dominant in Karachi due to the ethnic factor; its supporters and affiliates are descendants of immigrants from India after the 1947 partition. MQM will not face any competition in this area.

Peshawar could change the electoral map due to the decreasing popularity of the Pakistan National Party (PNP). This party is affiliated with the PPP because of its support for Washington in its war against al-Qaeda and Taliban in tribal areas and as well as the use of drones, which led to hundreds of civilian deaths in the area. The PNP was also targeted by Taliban, which assassinated its leaders and attacked its electoral rallies, causing it to lose its ability to gather and mobilise people.

According to a poll conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) in February 2013, the majority of people in Punjab will vote for the PML led by Nawaz Sharif. The party will also get the majority of votes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through its allies. In Balochistan, the votes will be distributed among several parties. *In Sindh, PPP and MQM will win.*(1)

Imran Khan: A Rising Power

Politics in Pakistan is feudal-based; it is not easy for a land owner to give up his or her land, sell it or have it seized. Sixty-year old Imran Khan is known among Pakistanis as a cricket legend that inspires many of Pakistan's youth. He attempted to move his victory from sports to politics, but usually politics, especially in Pakistan, are slow and gradual. In the 1997 elections, Khan won only 0.8% of the votes while in the 2002 elections, he won 1.7%. He secured only one seat even though the president at the time, Pervez

Musharraf, kept Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, the main leaders of the two traditional parties, away from the electoral scene. Khan and the JI boycotted the 2008 elections.

Some PML and PPP activists joined Khan's party, which some saw as a withdrawal from the change slogans promoted by Khan. Additionally, many Pakistanis view these figures negatively and consider them part of the problem. Some Pakistanis hold that Khan relies on the votes of youth, who constitute 40% of eligible voters. The youth vote will likely favour him.

Some surveys indicate that Khan and the PPP are now equally popular in Pakistan. Although it is difficult for Khan to expand his support in rural and remote areas because of deep-rooted and dominant feudal policies there, there are indications that his popularity is increasing in urban areas and among intellectuals. This is reflected in his focus on the use of new media, more so than any other party.(2) Despite such prospects, Khan faces two weaknesses. The first weakness is his diminishing power in rural areas and the party's decision to send development support to certain areas through local governmental councils rather than its candidates; this will lessen the attraction of voters as they rally around candidates that directly assist them or affect their lives. The second weakness is his lack of foreign policy experience. His reputation was also harmed after he accepted into PTI leadership people who had previously worked with Musharraf and other traditional parties. This contradicted his change-oriented policy, and caused him to lose credibility in the eyes of some.

Islamists and Nationalists in Balochistan

Having boycotted the 2008 election, JI and nationalist parties in the turbulent province of Balochistan will participate in this election, which should help reduce violence and marginalisation the province has suffered for years. Sardar Akhtar Mengal, chief of the Balochistan National Party (BNP), also returned from his four-year self-imposed exile in Dubai. Further, Nawabzada Talal Bugti, chief of the Baloch Republican Party, announced he would run in this election. He had boycotted the 2008 election because it was supervised by Musharraf's government and Musharraf had been accused of killing Bugti's father, Nawab Akbar, the party's former leader, in August 2006. This revived hopes for the possibility of reducing tension and unrest in Balochistan. The military welcomed the return and participation of these Balochi parties in the election, hoping this will weaken extremism and fundamentalism among Balochis.

The JI, which has a presence all over Pakistan, operates mainly in Punjab and Pakhtunkhwa. It coordinates with and is the closest ally of the PML. However, the PML criticises the JI for 'claiming more than they deserve.'(3)

Taliban attacks on the Awami National Party (ANP) and MQM candidates in Pakhtunkhwa may provide the JI and other Islamist candidates an opportunity to gain votes by targeting their rivals' supporters, especially with their decreasing influence on people in the tribal and Pashtu areas.

In a survey conducted by the British Council in Islamabad in March 2013, young people between 18 and 29 were interviewed, and 38% of respondents preferred Islamic shari'ah, while 32% preferred military rule and only 29% preferred democracy.(4)

Musharraf, the Military and Taliban

The election commission barred Pakistan's former president, Pervez Musharraf, from running in the elections. This was followed by a warrant for his arrest and imprisonment. These developments, in addition to his escape from court – allegedly with the help of the government, and the issuance of an order from the antiterrorism court to detain him in his farm residence in Chak Shazad near Islamabad for two weeks was a strong blow to Musharraf. The military also felt humiliated to watch their former leader be tried for treason, a charge that directly affects and harms the credibility of the army. The military thus faced a difficult choice: either to support its former leader and maintain the spirit and influence of the military, or go without him and maintain its reputation by submitting to the judiciary and supremacy of law, thus avoiding the impression that it is above the law.

It seemed awkward for Musharraf to seek a seat in the National Assembly, a position lower than his former one. Many commentators have found it difficult to explain what one parliamentary seat could mean for him. Several districts are discussing the military's request that Musharraf not to return to the country, which could explain the insistence of those close to him and his attorneys that his trial should put the military in the dock with him. However, the judiciary rejected the attorneys' request to include the military in the case.

Army Chief of Staff, General Ashfaq Kayani, is not interested in supporting a single political party. He did not attempt to overthrow the incumbent government although he had sufficient opportunities to do so, and allowed both the government and parliament to complete their terms. Also, he did not get involved in Musharraf's case.

The Taliban is deliberately playing a disruptive role in the electoral process. In media statements, spokesperson for Pakistani Taliban, Ehsanullah Ehsan, called on Pakistanis to avoid the 'non-Islamic' elections and refrain from participating in the PPP, MQM and

ANP campaigns as these will be targeted by the Taliban.(5) Taliban operations have targeted candidates from these parties and continue to threaten their rallies, particularly in Pakhtunkhwa and the tribal areas.

New Heads and Foreign Policy

It is not easy to change the foreign policy of a country as it is governed by factors, conditions and circumstances that are hard to dispense with. However, the rise of Sharif's PML or Khan's PTI may force some change in relations with the United States; relations might tilt to a more equal footing rather than the subordination of Pakistan under the PPP. Additionally, change might be seen in relations with Iran. The PML could revoke the agreement with Iran to extend Iranian gas pipes to Pakistan, as it had previously threatened, as it is not as close to Iran as the PPP is and has better relations with Saudi Arabia. The PML will also likely seek dialogue with the Taliban, unlike the PPP, and Khan may go in a similar direction. However, Pakistani foreign policy will remain a reflection of the economic and financial crisis the country is undergoing; therefore, it may be hard to change it substantially.

Conclusion

There are two possible post-election scenarios for Pakistan's parliament. One is that no political party will be able, either by itself or with an ally, to form a government, and that there will have to be a weak coalition government that might be incapable of solving some of the difficult issues challenging the country. The second possibility is that one strong winner will sweep the polls and form a government with one or two allies as was the case with the PPP after the 2008 election.

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(1) Interview with PILDAT Executive Director, Ahmed Bilal, Islamabad, 15 April 2013.

(2) Interview with an official of the PTI's New Information Department, 22 April 2013.

(3) Interviews with PML and JI officials, April 2013.

(4) See <http://www.britishcouncil.org/pakistan-next-generation-ballot-box-report.pdf>.

(5) Taliban statements published in the Pakistani press, 18 March 2013.