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After Pakistan's Elections: Dealing with a Fractured Government

The excitement of Pakistan's February 18 election, a sharp rebuff to President Pervez Musharraf and his ruling party, has given way to intense maneuvering to form the next government and to anxiety about how a divided political leadership will tackle the country's formidable problems. The United States has pledged to work with all of Pakistan's political players and has apparently moved away from its emphasis on Musharraf. Its main concern will be with the effectiveness of Pakistan's counterinsurgency operations in and near the border areas with Afghanistan.

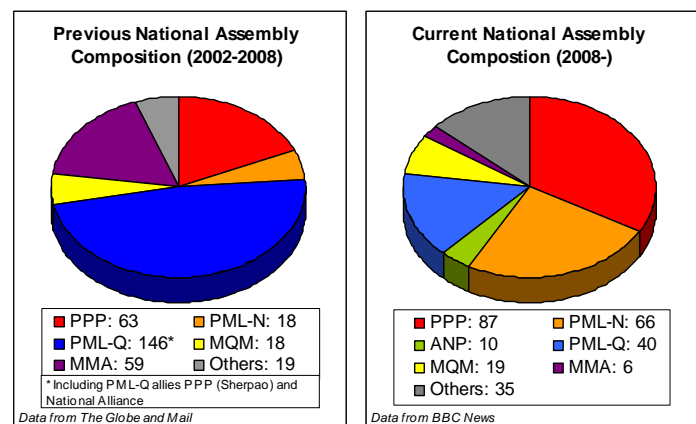
Not transparent, but largely peaceful: Despite problems with the voter rolls, restrictions on the press, sporadic violence, and some localized rigging, the elections have been accepted by the Pakistani people as broadly reflecting their collective will. The results were generally consistent with three different polls carried out during the month before elections. Turnout was 46 percent, a slight improvement on the last National Assembly elections in 2002. The immediate aftermath of the elections was marked by celebration. Now come the challenges of forming a government and dealing with the country's problems.

The winners: mainstream and secular parties: The elections reinforced the standing of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) as the two major mainstream parties in Pakistan. Together, these two parties have a majority of the seats in the National Assembly.

Benazir Bhutto's PPP was the single biggest winner, with 87 seats in the National Assembly plus its share of the 70 seats reserved for women and non-Muslims. Bhutto's assassination on December 27 added a sympathy vote to the PPP's already substantial 2002 showing of 63 seats. The PPP is the only party that won seats in all four provinces.

With 66 assembly seats before the allocation of reserved spots, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's PML-N was the other big winner, coming back from near oblivion in 2002 (18 seats). His party also won a clear majority in Punjab, the

country's largest province and PML-N's own home base. Sharif had been exiled twice by Musharraf. Despite being declared ineligible to run in these elections, he was the dominant personality in his party's campaign, and his courage in returning to Pakistan in defiance of Musharraf's wishes enhanced his popularity. He will be a major player in the coming political maneuvering, and his efforts to overturn his own current legal restrictions and return to center stage will be a critical element in the pending political drama.



The losers: Musharraf's party: The major loser in the elections was Musharraf's party, which fell from 146 to 40 seats in the assembly (before reserved seat allocations). Virtually all of Musharraf's cabinet ministers were defeated. The PML-Q, as his party is known (the Q stands for the title of the founder of Pakistan), is the latest in a long line of parties known in Pakistan as "king's parties," created to serve the ruler of the day. After a year of disastrous misjudgments by Musharraf, starting with his initial effort to fire the chief justice, Musharraf had become deeply unpopular, and his party reaped the results.

...and the religious parties: The other significant loser was the religious party conglomerate known as the MMA, which fell from 59 seats in 2002 to under 10 now. This was partly due to internal divisions: three of its six members decided to boycott the elections. A poor record in governing the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) added to their defeat;

and in 2008, they did not have the help from the army that had boosted their totals in 2002.

The MMA's loss created an interesting winner: the Awami National Party, long the voice of Pashtun nationalism and a firmly secular party. In 2002, it was eclipsed by the religious parties. It is now likely to form the provincial government in the NWFP.

Forming a new government: After weeks of maneuvering, the PPP and the PML-N have agreed on the basic contours of the new government. The PPP will lead the federal government. The cabinet will include ministers from the PML-N and several of the smaller parties, including a religious party that had originally been a quasi-ally of Musharraf. A decision on who will be prime minister is expected shortly. Bhutto's widower Asif Ali Zardari, the power figure in the PPP, did not run in this election and is hence ineligible to be prime minister for the moment. He clearly expects to continue making the important decisions and is widely expected to run in a by-election a few months time and subsequently become prime minister. In Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, the positions are reversed: the PML-N will head the provincial government while the ministers will be from the PPP.

But, the budding coalition faces major challenges. The PPP and PML-N are united in opposition to Musharraf, but they have been bitter enemies for decades. As long as they are working together in government, they will have to compete for patronage and influence, and Musharraf is likely to fan these flames.

The agreement establishing their coalition also addressed two issues on which they disagreed, but implementing the decisions will bring new complications. The first is the question of the judges that Musharraf removed in November. Sharif, despite his history of bullying the Supreme Court when he was prime minister, had insisted that the judges be restored. The PPP had proposed to have Parliament address this issue and clearly preferred to move slowly; Zardari feared that the restored judges might revive old corruption cases against him. The two-party agreement calls for a parliamentary resolution "within 30 days." Legal opinion is divided about what kind of action is required to restore the judges, and there could be a constitutional challenge from Musharraf's post-November judicial appointees.

The agreement also commits both parties to repeal the constitutional amendments passed under Musharraf's rule that permit the president to dismiss the government and the Parliament and that give the president, rather than the prime minister, the power to appoint the army chief. This would require a two-thirds majority in both the National Assembly and the Senate. The votes are not there at present for such a move, as the senate still has a pro-Musharraf majority and is not up for election until 2009.

Tensions and power centers: Both these moves put the prospective government on a collision course with Musharraf. The stage is set for an early test of whether Musharraf is prepared to accept a significant reduction of his powers in favor of an elected government. This will not come easily to this former general who accustomed to being in charge and devoted to the principle of "unity of command." Realistically, we should expect continued intrigue among four emerging power centers: a weakened President Musharraf; the PPP, where Zardari is likely to call the shots; the PML-N, with Nawaz as the major figure; and the army chief. This will be a difficult environment for policymaking.

Army pulling itself back: Musharraf's successor as army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, proclaimed 2008 "The Year of the Soldier." In the past year especially, the army has felt the sting of widespread disrespect, has undertaken unpopular missions, and has been on the receiving end of an unprecedented series of suicide bombings. Its professional performance has looked weak. Especially embarrassing was one episode in which over 200 soldiers and officers surrendered to militants.

Kiyani has sought to place greater distance between the army and domestic politics. His leadership was widely credited with keeping the army out of polling day election rigging. Like the rest of the army high command, he was appointed by Musharraf, but signs of his putting his own stamp on the army are already apparent. In a move to deemphasize the army's political role, Kiyani has ordered some of the military officials seconded to civilian government departments to return to army jobs. He has also restricted contact between military officers and politicians.

Tough challenges ahead: The new government will be preoccupied with securing its power and dealing with the issues that dominated the past year. But it also faces major problems requiring policy decisions and political mobilization. One such problem that was not on the worry list until recently is the economy. Mismanagement of the wheat markets led to sudden shortages of wheat flour, Pakistan's most important staple food, just before the election. Problems of water management and electricity supply have also become a public issue.

The critical problem: militant violence: The issue that poses the greatest danger to Pakistan and to the new government, however, is militant violence. In 2007, more soldiers and civilians were killed in terrorist violence than in the previous six years combined—more than 1,365 people, according to U.S. director of national intelligence Mike McConnell. Within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), pro-Taliban combatants have consolidated ranks under the Tehrik-e-Taliban headed by Baitullah Mehsud, a prime suspect in the Bhutto assassination. In the Swat Valley, an armed insurgency has flared under the leadership of a pro-Taliban cleric. FATA has been the "Wild West" of South Asia

since the days of the British Empire, but the situation in Swat is troubling because the valley is located within the “settled areas” of Pakistan.

Both these conflicts seem to be in a temporary lull, but for different reasons. In Swat, the army has gained the upper hand by keeping the militants under constant pressure. In South Waziristan in FATA, a new cease-fire has reportedly been brokered. But bombings have continued elsewhere since the election. As has been the trend since the summer of 2007, the main target is the military. The bombing of a navy training facility in the heart of downtown Lahore on March 4 is a case in point.

While Pakistan’s political rivals agree that it is past time for Pakistan to take ownership of its domestic terrorism problem and reassert the authority of the state, they do not agree on how to do this. It is clear that this type of violence is unpopular in Pakistan. The PPP has been much more forthright than the PML-N in condemning suicide bombings and other extremist violence. Both parties have said that they want to get Pakistan out of the business of “treating our people like terrorists,” with the implication that they will seek to reach political agreements and deemphasize the military response to these problems. Properly carried out, such a strategy might work, but uncertainty about how Pakistan is proceeding will cause great anxiety there and in the United States.

The United States and Musharraf: Washington’s Musharraf-centric policy has caused something of a backlash in Pakistan. President George Bush’s decision to telephone Musharraf after the election, and high-level statements from Washington emphasizing Musharraf as a central part of the postelection setup, have raised concerns that the United States was trying to ignore or undo the elections. More recently, congressional testimony by Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte that did not specifically mention Musharraf has given greater credibility to U.S. assertions that it wanted to work with whatever government emerged from the election. The United States always looms large on the Pakistani political scene, but even by those standards, it is being seen, for better or for worse, as the master string puller at a time when U.S. popular appeal is unusually low.

The U.S. priority: counterinsurgency: A recent series of high-level American visitors to Pakistan have put the spotlight on U.S. concerns about Pakistan’s ability to manage the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and the problem of domestic militancy. Since January 2008, visitors to Pakistan have included CENTCOM commander Admiral William Fallon, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, and Director of Central Intelligence Michael Hayden. The United States has offered to assist Pakistan with counterinsurgency training, focusing primarily on the Frontier Corps, a paramilitary force that operates on the front lines in

the border region. U.S. government officials have expressed optimism that the United States and Pakistan can work together in the campaign against terrorism under the new Pakistani government.

Both the United States and Pakistan have added an economic dimension to their military efforts. The United States has pledged \$750 million over five years to support economic development in FATA. The political dimension of the strategy is less clear. The erosion of the traditional social structure in FATA makes it harder to define a political approach. The big debate within Pakistan today is over whether the national strategy should repress violent extremists or induce them to join the political system.

High stakes: The implications are enormous, not just for the United States, which is determined to protect its mission in Afghanistan and to prevent the creation of a new terrorist sanctuary in Pakistan, but even more for Pakistan itself. The Pakistani state has been the target of extremist violence in the past year. It will need wisdom, cleverness, and determination to reclaim its authority and restore security around the country. The new government will benefit from popular support and legitimacy, at least for a short period, as it develops its new approach. But it will inevitably be very preoccupied with maintaining itself in power and overcoming its built-in animosities. A difficult time lies ahead.

—Jeffrey Ellis and Teresita C. Schaffer

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