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Forthcoming Pakistan Elections: A Profile on Pro-Musharraf Political Parties

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Preface

The assassination of Ms Benazir Bhutto on 27 December 2007 in Rawalpindi plunged Pakistan, already rocked by months of agitations by liberal-secular as well as Islamic fundamentalist opponents of the government of President Pervez Musharraf, deeper into anarchy and chaos, creating for a few days, a most critical situation. Nationwide armed clashes between the followers of Ms Bhutto and the security forces were reported. Particularly in her home province of Sindh, a virtual rebellion seemed to be taking shape but the government managed to bring the situation under control through the threat of 'shooting on sight'. However, the situation remains volatile.

The power and authority of President Pervez Musharraf had already started to wane because of months of protests and agitation against his authoritarian regime. Ms Bhutto's death greatly compounded his difficulties. He ordered three days of mourning and promised to do everything within his power to bring the culprits to the book.

The general elections scheduled for 8 January 2008 were postponed to 18 February 2008, although the two major parties, the Pakistan Peoples Party – Parliamentarians (PPP-P), led by the late Ms Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), led by Nawaz Sharif, were opposed to it.

Under the circumstances, it is in place to present the last set of major parties in this series – those that are aligned to President Musharraf. They are the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) and the Muttahida Quomi Movement (MQM).

A Profile on Pro-Musharraf Political Parties

Until 12 October 1999, when General Musharraf overthrew Prime Minister Nawaz, there was only one united Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Afterwards it split into two – the PML-Q is the breakaway group that abandoned Mr Sharif and shifted its support to General Musharraf while those who remained loyal to Mr Sharif began to call their group the PML-N.

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The PML-Q does not consist of any charismatic leader but some of the important players in it are the two cousins, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, from the northerly town of Gujrat in the Punjab. They are basically of a lower middle class background belonging to the Jatt tribe but, over the years, have acquired great wealth through their close contacts with successive governments, including the present one. Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain served briefly as prime minister in 2004. He is currently the president of the PML-Q.

Chaudhry Pervez Elahi was the chief minister of the powerful province of Punjab until the end of November 2007 when the assemblies were dissolved before the general election. Another important figure in the PML-Q is Mushahid Hussain Syed, the former editor of the English-language newspaper, *The Muslim*, and later adviser to Nawaz Sharif. He is secretary-general of the PML-Q. All three are Punjabis.

The party has its support in all provinces of Pakistan, although as supporters of General Musharraf, the PML-Q and parliamentarians are referred disparagingly as the “King’s Party”. Analysts have noted that, in the last few years, the PML-Q has been spending large sums of money on education and other development projects. Therefore, it could do at well at the polls, but such prognoses were made before the assassination of Ms Bhutto. Recent reports suggest that, in a fair and free election, the support base of the PML-Q will shrink significantly and instead the voters will either vote for Mr Sharif’s PML-N or Ms Bhutto’s PPP-P.

In its election manifesto, the PML-Q mentions five “Ds” – Democracy, Development, Devolution, Diversity and Defence. It makes a commitment to work in a spirit of reconciliation rather than confrontation. Secretary-General Mushahid Hussain Syed presents the PML-Q vision in the following words, “Our manifesto is based on human rights and values, tolerance, harmony and a free media”.

The second main party supporting President Musharraf, the MQM, originated in 1978 as an ethnic student movement of the progeny of Urdu-speaking Muslims, called Mohajirs, who had migrated to Pakistan in 1947 from northern India and Hyderabad Deccan when British India was partitioned to create two separate states, India and the Muslim-majority Pakistan. It is important to note that President Musharraf is also an Urdu-speaking Mohajir.

The Mohajirs settled in the southern province of Sindh, where over time, they came to dominate the main towns of that province as well as Karachi – Pakistan’s main port city and the centre of its industrial and financial strength. This was resented by the indigenous Sindhis as competition for jobs and opportunities in the province intensified between the Mohajir and Sindhi intelligentsia.

In 1984, the student organisation was superseded by a political organisation clearly bearing an ethnic name – the Mohajir Quomi (nation) Movement (MQM). The supreme leader of the MQM, Altaf Hussain, and his close associates, belong to the lower middle class. This is a fact they mention with pride, claiming that the stand for the interests of the common man.

It is widely believed that the Pakistan military, especially the Inter Services Intelligence, played an important role in helping the MQM establish its political hold in Karachi and other parts of Sindh. This was to counter the popularity of the PPP, whose charismatic leader and

former Sindhi-origin prime minister of Pakistan, Z. A. Bhutto (1971-77), was overthrown by General Zia in 1977 and executed subsequently through a divided Supreme Court verdict in April 1979.

In the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, the MQM was involved in violent clashes with the PPP and other Sindhi nationalist organisations. The MQM gained notoriety from the beginning as a violence-prone party, with Altaf Hussain and his lieutenants exercising dictatorial control over its cadres, ordering violence against opponents, including murder and extorting money from shopkeepers and businessmen in Karachi. Its activities finally brought it into conflict with the military administration of Karachi which ordered stern action against the MQM. Altaf Hussain fled to the United Kingdom in the early 1990s and has remained there ever since, from where he has continued to exercise an iron control over his party and the Mohajirs. There are dozens of cases pending against him in the Pakistani courts, including some accusing him of being involved in murder cases. He has been granted British citizenship, however.

It is important to note that, in all the elections since the 1980s the MQM has always won an overwhelming majority of seats in those areas where the Mohajirs are in a majority. In the 2002 election, it won 18 seats out of 342 in the Pakistan National Assembly. It has also been forming governments in Sindh and, until recently before the national and provincial assemblies and the governments were dissolved, the chief minister and governor were from the MQM. In the 2002 Sindh Assembly, the MQM had 41 seats out of total of 168.

In any event, in 1997, the MQM tried to change its image and reputation. It changed its name to Mutthida (United) Quomi Movement instead of the earlier Mohajir Quomi Movement to indicate a nationalist rather than an ethnic origin. It also adopted a more moderate and secular line in politics. After General Musharraf came to power in 1999, the MQM started supporting him and has remained a steadfast ally of his. It has backed the war on terror and the modernist reforms he introduced to some of the Islamic laws implemented earlier in Pakistan during the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88).

It announced a programme directed at improving the situation of the poor masses. It would include greater spending on education, health and employment opportunities. The MQM also wants to abolish feudalism and to distribute land to the tillers. The MQM is expected to win the majority of seats in the Mohajir-majority urban areas of Sindh in the election planned for 18 February 2008.

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