

ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasijie@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Post-election Pakistan: Is there Hope or Despair for the People?

Iftikhar A. Lodhi^{*}

The brief euphoria that followed the 18 February 2008 polls in Pakistan seems to have died down and the harsh realities of an immature polity are beginning to surface. Despite the decision of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) to form the government, as well as President Pervez Musharraf's promise to work with the new government, the prophecies of an Islamist takeover and/or Pakistan's disintegration have become a recurrent theme.

The turmoil in Pakistan today is far less intense than that in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Pakistan is under greater international scrutiny and, therefore, cause for greater concern, due to its nuclear weapons, its strategic geography, and it being a front line ally in the United States-led "war on terror". If Pakistan fails in any way, it will be a failure of the United States, and its "war on terror", which is already mired in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, the very actions that Washington believes will bring stability to Pakistan are a ready-made recipe for greater instability and turmoil in the country. The narrowly defined and misplaced United States strategic interests have been and are in direct conflict with the democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people. The recent poll clearly showed that the people want change and or, at least, to get rid of President Musharraf and his coterie, the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q). Yet, the Bush administration has been staunchly supporting Musharraf. Whilst the country was deciding on the new government, the United States tried to broker a deal between Musharraf's supporting party, the PML-Q, and the largest winning party, the center-left secular PPP, by sidelining the second largest winning party, the center-right PML-N.

The current coalition between PPP and PML-N, which has defied the United States pressure, faces many challenges such as addressing the socio-politic and economic issues and on nation building. However, even before the two parties can start to work on the larger national agenda, they will need to resolve their own differences. There are wide differences, ideological and tactical, between the two parties.

Firstly, the two parties do not agree on how the "war on terror" should be fought. While the slain leader of PPP, Ms Benazir Bhutto, asserted that the scourge of terrorism would be dealt

^{*} Mr Iftikhar Lodhi is a Research Associate at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute within the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at isasial@nus.edu.sg.

with an iron hand, she never elaborated a strategy. She vaguely argued that the Pakistan military was not doing enough and needed direction. One is not too sure how the PPP would be able to muzzle the Pakistan army which is not known to take orders from its elected leaders. Mr Nawaz Sharraf, head of the PML-N, on the other hand, is known to be sympathetic to the Islamists, if not the extremists. After winning elections, he has asked Washington to “define the war on terror”. He made a similar call to the Americans on 25 March 2008. The Pushtun nationalist secular-center-left Awami National Party that swept away the elections in north western region has suggested initiating talks with the militants, differentiating between Al-Qaida and Pakistani Taliban.

Secondly, the two parties have differing views on the role of President Musharraf in any future government setup. He has vowed to stay on and has stated that he would support the new government. However, the civil society and the PML-N have called for his resignation. Though the PPP is willing to work with him, apparently on Washington’s demand, it wants to curtail his powers. On the other hand, the Pakistan army has not given any categorical notion of backing him, though the Army Chief, General Kyani, mentioned that the army is not distancing itself from Musharraf.

Thirdly, the two parties had originally differed on the issue of the restoration of the Supreme Court judges. The lawyers’ movement to reinstate the deposed judges has been able to sustain itself effectively over one year despite pressures from various groups. President Musharraf could not have imagined such a reaction when he sacked Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry on 9 March 2007. The movement, though primarily initiated and controlled by the legal fraternity, soon gained support from the civil society. The newly established television channels also played a critical role in this episode. While the PML-N fully supported the movement, the PPP initially remained silent. Nevertheless, both parties have lately agreed to restore the judges. In fact, one of the first orders issued by Mr Yousaf Raza Gilani after being elected as prime minister, backed by the PPP and PML-N, is the removal of all hindrances on the movement of the deposed Chief Justice and other such judges.

It now seems that Washington is starting to realise that it is Pakistan, and not Musharraf, which is the indispensable ally in the “war on terror”. The recent statements from the United States Department suggest that it may willy-nilly succumb to the demands of the Pakistanis. If the Bush administration chooses to keep its support for Musharraf at the expense of the state institutions and political stability in any conflicting situation, it would cost Pakistan dearly. The problem of American support for President Musharraf lies with two widely-held misperceptions in Washington. First, he is the only guarantee for Pakistan’s cooperation in fighting extremists and if he is not present on the political scene, the Islamists would take over the country. Secondly, he, or generally the army, alone can hold the country together which would otherwise fall apart.

The Islamist takeover threat has, honestly, been blown out of proportions. There is no way that the Islamic parties can come to power, either by democratic means or through staging a mass uprising. A cursory look at the history of Pakistan reveals that the Islamic parties, even the moderate ones, have never enjoyed popular support. Though Pakistan came into existence in the name of religion, its founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah clearly had a vision of a secular state. The westernised elite in Pakistan have followed his footsteps since then. The largest ever number of popular vote for all religious parties put together was 10 percent in 2002. They secured 68 seats in the National Assembly. This was really an aberration as the Pakistani people voted for the religious parties in widespread anger over the United States’

attack on Afghanistan. In the recent polls, generally believed to be fair and free, these religious parties were able to secure only six seats in the National Assembly.

There are also fears of an Islamist rebellion within the Pakistan army. Such propositions overlook the history and structure of the institution and that of civil-military relations. There have been more than a dozen such attempts in the past from middle and high rank officers with different ideologies, communist as well as Islamist. All such attempts were easily and quickly put down. The Pakistan army is highly professional and, since the British times, it has been engaged in combats in Islamist rebellions in and outside the country. It was the army who nurtured the Islamists with the help of the United States for its strategic purposes in Afghanistan. There are reportedly some lower and middle rank officers who are sympathetic to the Islamists but these are unlikely to influence the overall control and command structure of the army.

Similarly, the disintegration theory does not stand under scrutiny either. The only active nationalist movement that has a secessionist agenda today in Pakistan is the Baloch movement. The movement turned into armed insurgency in 2005. However, it lacks the widespread support of the masses. Comparisons have been drawn between today's Pakistan and Pakistan in 1970 when then-East Pakistan became Bangladesh. The fact that Bangladesh and Pakistan are separated by a one thousand miles of hostile Indian territory leaves any comparison inappropriate. Moreover, the Bengalis are a homogenous population and much larger than West Pakistan's population. The Awami League of Sheikh Mujeeb then enjoyed popular support, including a strong bureaucracy. And yet the final victory was secured with the intervention of the Indian army. None of these situations are present today or are likely to take place in Pakistan.

There are allegations by Islamabad that "foreign powers" are fanning the flames in Balochistan. Many of these Baloch groups have been operating from Afghanistan and their financial and political centres are established in the Middle East, the United Kingdom and the United States. Whilst the grievances on the backwardness of the province are legitimate, the Baloch rebels are largely private militias of tribal chieftains. They are reportedly motivated by the prospects of Balochistan's potential wealth and the role it will play in "the new great game" in which they want their share. Nevertheless, the approach taken by President Musharraf to tackle these problems was flawed. There must be a political solution to the grievances of the Baloch people. Similarly, a whole-hearted multipronged strategy is required to fight Islamic extremism in the long run.

At the moment, there remains a lack of trust between the progressive elements of the civil society, including the elected democratic parties, and the Washington-backed Musharraf regime. At a time when the two centrist parties will form a coalition government, Washington will need to back them whole-heartedly even if it means Musharraf losing some, if not all, of his power as a result.

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