

ISAS Brief

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Elections in Pakistan – New President, Same Old Story

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Until eight months ago, no one would have predicted that Mr Asif Ali Zardari would become a pivotal figure in Pakistani politics, much less the President of Pakistan. Better known as the controversial spouse of former Prime Minister, Ms Benazir Bhutto, Mr Zardari's name was tainted with allegations of corruption and linked to extortion and murder. He spent eleven years in jail though none of the charges were proven in court before being bailed out by then-President Pervez Musharraf through the National Reconciliation Ordinance. But he has overcome all odds to be elected Pakistan's President.

Mr Zardari's election victory was impressive, winning 481 out of 702 Electoral College votes. The other two candidates were Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's (PML-N) Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui, who secured 153 votes and Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam's (PML-Q) Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed who garnered 44 votes. A breakdown of the total electoral votes shows that Mr Zardari won convincingly at both the national and provincial levels. He secured 281 out of 436 votes at the national level in both houses of the parliament (of which 10 were declared invalid). In comparison, Mr Siddiqui and Senator Hussain managed only 111 and 34 votes respectively.

The Pakistan Peoples Party's (PPP) strength was further reinforced at the provincial assemblies where its nominee, Mr Zardari, swept all votes in the Sindh assembly, and scored convincing victories in Baluchistan and the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) over his two rivals. Only in Punjab, did he come in second (22 electoral votes) as compared with 35 votes won by Mr Siddiqui. The PPP had clearly overtaken PML-N in securing allies in the run-up to the Presidential polls. With the support of such parties the Awami National Party, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, the PPP knows that it can survive at the centre and provincial assemblies even after the exit of PML-N from the government. Since the presidential nominees were fielded along party lines, the results can be seen as a reflection of the present strength of these three parties in Pakistan. The PPP is now in a commanding position, with its members occupying the key positions of President, Prime Minister, Speaker and Deputy Speaker, as well as being in government in all four of Pakistan's provinces.

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From one view, the Presidential election results may be seen as the culmination of an anti-Musharraf wave, leading to the full restoration of democracy with a civilian government and civilian head of state. However, according to a Gallup poll of 2,000 people, almost half were not in favour of any of the three candidates and only 26 percent approved of Mr Zardari.

A more cynical view is that Mr Zardari's ascension to the presidency is a stab in the back for the democratic movement in Pakistan, which was based largely on the demand for the restoration of the judiciary and the curtailment of Presidential powers enshrined in Article 58(2)(b). In fact, it was Mr Zardari's failure to live up to expectation on these two issues that led Mr Nawaz Sharif to pull out of the coalition. Article 58(2)(b) allows the President to dissolve the National Assembly and sack the elected Prime Minister, and both the PPP and the PML-N had agreed in the 2006 Charter of Democracy to repeal these anti-democratic Presidential powers. Mr Zardari has said that he would redress the balance of power between the presidency and parliament, and this is something that he would need to act on urgently. His record, however, is not that encouraging, given that he has prevaricated on the issue of the full restoration of the judiciary, choosing instead a piecemeal approach to reinstating a few judges.

Pakistan's new President may have been elected by a comfortable margin, but he has tremendous challenges ahead of him. One of the major problems that Mr Zardari will have to deal with, first and foremost, is rising militancy in Pakistan. Suicide attacks are increasing, and even on the day of the election, a suicide bomber blew up a police post in the NWFP, killing 31 people.

Second, Pakistan's economy is in dire straits, with unemployment and under-employment rising, inflation soaring at 25 percent and foreign investment, which had been steadily increasing since 2001, showing almost no increase in the last year. The Pakistani rupee has depreciated by 20 percent this year and the Karachi stock exchange has lost a third of its value over the same period.

Apart from the economic crisis, Mr Zardari has to keep a watchful eye on Mr Sharif, who despite having declared that he would not attempt to bring down the government, is already working quietly behind the scenes to revive the alliance between his party and the PML-Q and to consolidate his support base. Mr Zardari has to decide whether to continue trying to work with Mr Sharif or whether to take him on. Recently, rumours surfaced that the PPP was targeting Mr Sharif and the PML-N when it was reported, that the National Accountability Bureau, which operates under the Ministry of Law, was reopening corruption cases against Mr Sharif and members of his family. The PPP leadership has been quick to quash these rumours, stating that it does not believe in political victimisation. The PML-N remains very strong in Punjab, which is the largest province in terms of population and the PPP has to be politically sensitive to this in its electoral calculations.

However, to be at all effective, Mr Zardari's first priority must be to establish his credibility. This will require the repeal of Article 58(2)(b), the restoration of the judiciary, giving up the co-chairmanship of the PPP to respect the non-partisan nature of the presidential post, and quelling the rising militancy. Failure to do any of these will lead to further destabilisation of democratic politics in Pakistan and could result either in another popular uprising and potential civil unrest or pave the way for the return of the military. So far, the military, under General Kayani, has remained passive and has allowed the civilian parties to continue their

struggles. However, Pakistan's history has shown that the military will not hesitate to act if it deems necessary.

The trouble is that carrying out each of the above measures could have a detrimental consequence on Mr Zardari. Repealing Article 58(2)(b) would mean stripping himself of considerable power as President. Fully restoring the judiciary risks the danger of the NRO being opened up for scrutiny. Quelling militancy requires firm action against a segment of his own people and working closely with the United States, which could lead to speculations of Zardari being too close to the United States. Pakistan's military is unlikely to tolerate a President who gives any appearance of condoning foreign military offensives within Pakistan's borders, as happened just three days before the Presidential election when United States forces launched an attack against an Al Qaeda target in South Waziristan. Mr Zardari is, thus, between the proverbial rock and the hard place, as he has to balance various competing interests, including his own domestic political constituency, the provincial interests, the military and the United States.

Pakistan may have a new President but its underlying problems remain. It will be interesting to see if and how Mr Zardari will inject a fresh approach to addressing these problems and propelling Pakistan towards full democracy and economic recovery.

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