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Election Prospects in Pakistan

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Elections are expected to be held in Pakistan towards the end of 2007 or early 2008. The current assemblies were elected in 2002. The principle is that the Election Commission should be given three months to organise the elections, which means that after October when the term of the current assemblies is completed new elections can be called anytime between November and January. The Pakistani electoral system is based on the first-past-the-post procedure as prevalent in Britain and India. Several parties take part in elections but the practice of elections and civilian governments is weakly developed in Pakistan. Therefore, it is not certain that elections will be held.

General Pervez Musharraf's term as president of Pakistan ends in November 2007. He has declared that he is a candidate for the post of president for another term, which he wants to contest while simultaneously retaining his post of chief of army staff. Further, he wants that the election of the president should be held before the general election. According to procedure as laid down in the pristine 1973 constitution (heavily amended since), the members of the national and provincial assemblies are elected by the people directly on the basis of universal adult franchise. The elected representatives of the national and provincial assemblies then elect the president.

Musharraf wants the members of the current assemblies to be assigned this task and not those who will be returned after the election. The pro-Musharraf Muslim League-Q and its allies have a comfortable majority in the various assemblies. Therefore, his opponents accuse him of arranging his election in a distorted and illegitimate manner. On 7 July 2007, some of the opposition leaders met in London and pledged not to accept him as a president-in-uniform elected by the current assemblies.

But Pakistani politicians are not known to speak consistently with one voice or in a principled manner when it comes to democracy and constitutionalism. With few exceptions, they are notorious for their corrupt ways, opportunism and general incompetence. The military have since a long time been exploiting contradictions deriving from the clash of ideology, interest and ambition among them.

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The Muslim League, which led the struggle for Pakistan, was a weak collection of regional Muslim leaders, landlords and the Muslim intelligentsia who had joined ranks against power being transferred to the Congress Party in a united India, alleging it will result in permanent Hindu domination. But once Pakistan had been attained in August 1947, the different factions and caucuses fell out over sharing of power and positions and the Muslim League disintegrated.

On the other hand, the powerful civil service and the military were the two best organised institutions that Pakistan inherited from the colonial past. Initially, the civil servants called the shots and weak civilian governments were formed and dissolved by them. But in October 1958, the military led a bloodless coup and General Ayub Khan came to power. Since then, the military has been a prominent player in Pakistani politics and has eclipsed the civil servants.

The result has been that Pakistan has been ruled by military bosses for most of its chequered history – 2007 happens to coincide with the 60th anniversary of its founding. Different permutations, ranging from pure martial law regimes to mixed type of civilian and military rule headed by the army chief, have existed. Even when civilian governments have been in power, they have had to bow to the will and power of the top generals. Consequently, the institutionalisation of parliamentary democracy and concomitant electoral processes and procedures is weak and brittle in Pakistan.

Perhaps more interesting and intriguing is the fact that although Pakistan enjoys the reputation of being a conservative and authoritarian polity in which oppressive religious laws menace the lives particularly of women and religious minorities, at no point in its history have the Islamists enjoyed more than 10 to 12 per cent of the national vote or seats in the legislative assemblies.

Also, the sectarian and sub-sectarian divisions that obtain in Pakistan among Muslims play some part in making a rigid Islamicisation of Pakistan unattractive to significant portions of the Muslim population. Of an estimated total population of 165 million, 97 per cent is considered to consist of Muslims. Of these, some 15-20 per cent are Shias, while the rest belong to the majority Sunni community. But doctrinal tensions and sub-divisions exist even among Sunnis. Therefore, reaching a consensus on a Sharia-bound Islamic state is not easy to achieve for the clerics. Given a choice, most Pakistanis vote for middle parties or even left-populist parties that are respectful of Islam and are pragmatic in their programmes.

The exception is, of course, the current composition of the assemblies. In the 2002 election, the main middle parties, the Pakistan People's Party led by Benazir Bhutto and the Muslim League-N led by Nawaz Sharif, were banned from taking part in it. The Muslim League-Q won a majority in the National Assembly and in the provincial legislatures of Punjab and Sindh amid cries of vote rigging by the opposition. In the North West Frontier Province, however, an alliance of Islamist parties – the Muthidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) comprising mainly of the Jama'at-e-Islami (JI) and Jami'at-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) – won a majority while in Balochistan its strength increased significantly.

It is important to note that both the JI and JUI (in 1947 it was a part of the Jami'at-e-Ulema-e-Hind) were opposed to the creation of a national state for Muslims. The former was of the view that a national state based on secular principles had no theological support in Islam

while the latter feared that not only that Pakistan would not be a true Islamic state but that the Muslim community of India would be partitioned and thus divided and weakened.

However, once Pakistan came into being the JI, JUI and other Islamist parties began a campaign to convert Pakistan into an Islamic state based on the strict application of the Sharia in all departments of government, civil society and the private sphere. A liaison between the military and the Islamists has existed in Pakistan since at least the time of the Afghan Jihad, but it originated already in the late 1960s when Pakistani politics polarised into right and left as well as centrist and regionalist axes. In recent months, relations between President Musharraf and the MMA have soured as the former is seen to bow before US pressure and order bombardment of suspected terrorist strongholds in the tribal areas close to the border with Afghanistan.

The two mainstream parties with large followings in Pakistan are the Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League-N but their leaders, former prime ministers, Benazir and Sharif, are currently living in exile. Against the former a number of cases of alleged misappropriation of government money and abuse of office are pending in European as well as Pakistani courts. If she were return without entering into some understanding with the government, she would most certainly be arrested. The latter was overthrown by General Musharraf in 1999 and banned from taking part in politics for 10 years and sent into exile to Saudi Arabia. He was accused of endangering the lives of General Musharraf and hundreds of passengers on a Pakistan International Airlines flight returning from Sri Lanka by ordering that the plane not be allowed to land on Pakistani soil.

A new national stature politician has emerged in Pakistan in recent years. He is the legendary cricket hero, Imran Khan, who heads the Insaaf Tehrik (Justice Movement). While Benazir enjoys the reputation of being ideologically left of centre and Sharif right of centre, Khan's ideological inclination remains unclear. Initially, he was noted to have been apprenticed in politics by hawkish former generals such as General Hamid Gul who headed the all-powerful Inter-Services Intelligence, but seems to have adopted an independent position in favour of the rule of law and constitutionalism. His popular following after he changed course and became a champion of citizen rights and rule of law has yet to be put to test, but in the election of 2002 he was rejected by the people.

In addition, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), with its strong base in Pakistan's megacity of Karachi and in the urban areas of Sindh Province, is another important player in Pakistani politics. It is represented both in the National Assembly and in the Sindh Assembly where it heads a coalition government. The MQM initially gained notoriety in the late 1980s as a neo-fascist ethnic party as it was violence prone and used it extensively against other nationalities as well as dissenters within the Urdu-speaking group, but then gradually toned down that image and began to advocate secular and enlightened ideas in opposition to the pro-Jihadi elements striving for a Taliban-type of regime change in Pakistan. The MQM became a close ally of General Musharraf, who it may be noted is also of Mohajir origin.

For several weeks now Pakistan has been witnessing protests and demonstrations, mainly by lawyers and political cadres, in the wake of the legal and constitutional crisis precipitated by General Musharraf declaring Chief Justice Chaudhry of the Pakistan Supreme Court a non-functional (a novel term meaning practically removed from his office) on allegations of misuse of office.

It is widely believed that Justice Chaudhry had told General Musharraf that he could not contest elections while remaining in uniform and that his election as president had to be carried out before the end of 2007. Moreover, he had taken up several cases of Pakistani citizens, mainly critical journalists and political activists, abducted by the security forces to produce those individuals in court. He also ordered a stop to the sale of Karachi Steel Mill below market price which the government had agreed to.

However, on 12 May 2007, the MQM again displayed its proclivity towards violence when its cadres openly carrying guns and automatic weapons clashed with supporters of Justice Chaudhry when he visited Karachi to deliver a speech on the invitation of the Karachi Bar Council.

Another major crisis faced by the government has been the very visible defiance of government writ and authority by Islamic radicals in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. Some months earlier, the female students of that Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) seminary created a stir by raiding an alleged brothel and arresting the woman believed to be running. Later, they declared that Islamic law or Sharia will be enforced by them in Islamabad and elsewhere in Pakistan.

The government prevaricated for a long time but a showdown was in the offing since a long time because the hardcore jihadis kept on increasing their level of open defiance and flagrant disregard for the government accusing Musharraf of serving US interests in the war against terror by attacking strongholds of pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan. The Islamists were laced with mortars and machine guns and other automatic weapons. How did they acquire sophisticated weapons literally under the nose of the government is a question which suggests that some rogue elements within the military establishment must have provided them to the militants.

In any event, finally determined military action was ordered by the government to flush out the Islamists from the mosque on 11 July 2007. Of the 1,500 men and women who were barricading inside the mosque and its various rooms and compounds some 1,300 accepted the amnesty offered to them by the government but the rest kept resisting as Operation Silence unfolded. The main ringleader, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, and some others fell fighting. His elder brother, Abdul Aziz Ghazi, however, was arrested a few days earlier trying to escape in the dressed up in a burqa (head to foot clothing worn by conservative Muslim women).

Thus two very different types of crises – one constitutional and the other based on street power – have burst out in Pakistani politics in recent days. How will they affect President Musharraf's future is a question many people are posing. While the menace of the Islamists has been crushed in Islamabad and the stern action that was taken may please sections of the population who want law and order to prevail, the Islamists are totally incensed. They have carried out a number of suicide bombings and threaten to kill the president. However, as long as the army remains loyal to Musharraf he can continue to hold on to the reigns of power.

Before 9/11, some 30 per cent of the Pakistan military all ranks were estimated to harbour Islamist sympathies and in some of the attempts on Musharraf's life such elements were involved. Most such people at the officer level have been retired. The top generals are pragmatists like Musharraf. There is no known Islamist lobby among them. However, the military may consider that Musharraf has become a liability and must go. This can be achieved short of a coup.

There is no tradition of the generals staging a coup against their chief, but chiefs have been told to go by their peers and that might mean Musharraf being replaced by another general. On the other hand, a coup led by middle-ranking officers harbouring Islamist sympathies is very unlikely because the army is organised and administrated in a manner that only generals can muster enough support to launch a full-fledged coup.

Although Musharraf has up to now been considered by the West as essential to stability and some sort of moderation in Pakistan, quite different signals are now being given by the United States as well as the European Union. While praise has poured in for stern action ordered by Musharraf against the Islamists in Islamabad, the overall policy has been critiqued from not doing enough to root out extremist Islam altogether. There can be no denying that Musharraf's popularity currently is on the decline. His idea of moderate Islam has failed to consolidate as an alternative to extremist Islam. He has not demonstrated enough resolution and firmness in dealing with the extremists in the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan. The law and order situation remains bad, public services are grossly inadequate and inefficient, and charges of corruption and abuse of power have been mounting against his government.

What would happen if Musharraf were suddenly no longer in power? As argued above, the Islamists will not be able to capture power unless the military backs them, but there is little evidence that such support will be forthcoming under the present circumstances. It is possible that the United States may consider a change in Islamabad necessary if a popular mass movement in favour of constitutionalism and democracy gets underway, but at present the situation is volatile and unpredictable. If the United States decides that it is time for a replacement, it may abandon Musharraf and back another general or reach some understanding with Benazir and/or Sharif and support the demand for an election. Therefore, calls have been made by the Bush administration as well as democrats that Pakistan should hold free and fair elections.

Some weeks earlier, rumours were rife that the Pakistan government and Benazir were in touch and a deal was in the offing, but after the judicial crisis assumed a popular character, Benazir seemed to have decided not to go ahead with it. But after the military action against the Lal Masjid radicals, she has come out strongly in support of the government's response. Could this open new channels for a compromise between her and Musharraf? Such a possibility cannot be dismissed, but as long as the constitutional crisis over the virtual dismissal of the chief justice is not resolved, it is doubtful she would risk striking a deal with the government.

The general assessment of the observers of Pakistani politics is that in a free and fair election the Pakistan People's Party and Muslim-League-N will win a majority of seats. A coalition government, comprising both Benazir and Nawaz, is possible but no such agreement exists at present. Imran Khan's electoral fortunes remain a matter of speculation. The Islamist parties will probably gain their normal share of 10 to 12 per cent votes.

Whether a new democratically elected government will take up the challenge and establish the rule of law, respect for constitutional procedure and use its power to curb extremism and terrorism remains to be seen. But first of all, a free and fair election has to take place.

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