

Pakistan Elections 2008

D SUBA CHANDRAN
&
REKHA CHAKRAVARTHI

Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

Elections 2008 are expected to be a turning point in the complicated political history of Pakistan. The final countdown to the most anticipated national elections in Pakistan has been not only the most scandalous but also, ironically, the most desperate and hopeful. The desperation and hope for a democratic government, has never been so heightened among the people of Pakistan. Despite numerous assurances from President Musharraf, will the elections still be free and fair? What would be the final outcome? Will it reflect popular will?

WILL THE ELECTIONS BE FREE AND FAIR?

Insiders in Pakistan are cynical about the prospects of a free and fair election and have questioned the rationale behind postponing them after Benazir Bhutto's assassination. Many others are convinced that the elections will be rigged, despite Musharraf's assurances that it would be the 'mother of all elections' and that they would be transparent, peaceful, free and fair. Pre-poll actions by the government hardly inspire any confidence

Firstly, the curb on media- print, radio and television, has remained even after the emergency was lifted. The government has imposed a strict code of conduct on the media with prohibitions against live coverage of political debates. Any violations of the rules could cost the media personnel three years of imprisonment and cancellation of their licenses.

Secondly, severe restraining of the judiciary has

already raised questions regarding the credibility of the elections. From sacking the Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry in March 2007 and then placing him under illegal house arrest since 3 November 2007 to replacing several other judges with his own nominees, Musharraf has ruthlessly undermined the legal institutions in Pakistan. It is to be noted that the judiciary in Pakistan is closely involved in the conduct of elections because the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) consists of five members – a retired Supreme Court justice and a serving high court judge from each province. Musharraf has not only barred the previous Supreme Court and Provincial High Court judges but has also replaced them with his exclusive choices, (read his cronies). In essence, any complaint of fraud or rigging will be taken up by the courts whose new members are mere puppets propped up by President Musharraf.

A third factor influencing the elections is the caretaker governments', both at the national and provincial level, partisan nature. The opposition parties have accused the caretaker governments of hand-picking the district returning officers, returning officers, and assistant returning officers who supervise the actual polling process in each province. Moreover, the caretaker governments have also been accused of using the intelligence agencies and police officials to influence the outcome of elections both at national and provincial levels.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), in spite of being an autonomous it has failed in the past to ensure a transparent election - the 2002 elections being an example. Furthermore, two seats in the ECP are presently vacant when it has to comprise of five members. There is more; the new electoral list

has missed nearly 20 million voters who took part in 2002. The ECP initially agreed to have electronic review of the rolls, however, the review was not permitted later. The ECP has also been charged for not having redressed any complaints regarding

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misappropriation of state funds and resources and for its inability to lift the restrictions that have been placed on political parties with regard to their election campaign.

One should also not forget the ECP's rejection of Nawaz Sharif's and Shabaz Sharif's nomination papers.

With less than 50 hours for the elections and just a day after Musharraf avowed to have free and fair elections, the US-based Human Rights Watch has claimed to have caught Pakistan's Attorney General Malik Qayyum on tape stating that the 18 February parliamentary elections will be 'massively rigged.' According to latest reports, the audiotape also indicates that the plans to rig the elections had been going on at least two months prior to the elections. It is interesting to note that Qayyum was the man who had to step down as a judge in 2001 on charges of misconduct. In short, the elections have already been rigged.

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WHAT IS LIKELY TO BE THE OUTCOME?

Predicting the outcome of an election that is already highly rigged is never likely to be accurate. However based on popular responses, one could understand the mood of the people and to whom they are likely to vote.

There are five major players in the elections: the PPP, PML-N, PML-Q, religious parties, especially the

JUI-F and the regional parties from the provinces of Sindh, Balochistan and the NWFP. Despite the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the following sympathy wave for the PPP, the pre-election scenario is not clear, due to numerous reasons. Punjab, especially north and central, is least affected by the assassination, though anti-Musharraf feeling remains high.

Balochistan and NWFP have been facing totally different problems, with the national mainstream parties including the PPP, PML-N and PML-Q having minimal presence. To conclude, there is no overarching national feeling on the eve of the February 18 elections, hence it would be necessary to understand how each province perceives. How is each province likely to respond to the elections?

Sindh

Predicting the results in Sindh is the easiest - Votebank in Sindh, which has more than 60 seats for the National Assembly, is clearly bi-polar. PPP is likely to sweep the rural Sindh and the MQM is likely to retain its hold over Karachi. In Sindh, especially in Karachi, the MQM appears the least affected, for its leader - Altaf Hussain, despite living in exile in UK has been remarkably successful in keeping the Mohajir votes intact. It is extremely unlikely that the Mohajirs will vote for the PPP.

The boycott of Jamaat-e-Islami is likely to result in MQM securing a couple of seats more in Karachi, thus taking its count to 13-15 for the National Assembly. Outside Karachi, the PPP is likely to sweep; one can expect many of the PML-Q stalwarts, who were a part of the government at the national and provincial levels, losing miserably. The PPP is not only likely to secure maximum number of seats from Sindh, around 27-30, but is also the clear winner with a huge margin.

Thus, the PPP's vote share is likely to increase considerably this time unlike the 2002 elections where the PPP polled maximum percentage of votes but failed to get maximum number of seats.

Balochistan

Balochistan presents an interesting picture on the eve of elections and also regarding the implications of the electoral outcome,. Though the

largest of all four provinces in terms of geography, it has the least representation in the National Assembly, with only 14 elected seats. Traditionally, until 2002 elections, the regional parties – led by Pashtun and Balochi groupings polled maximum number of votes and secured most of the seats for the National Assembly. The missionary zeal with which the 2002 elections were rigged resulted in the sidelining of these two and the emergence of religious parties, especially the JUI-F and the PML-Q.

The violence in post 2002 in Balochistan led by the BLA is no coincidence. It was a direct result of the sidelining of moderate regional forces in Balochistan. Unfortunately, both the Pashtun and the leading Balochi regional parties including the Pakhtunkwa Millat Awami Party (PkMAP), National Party, Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP) and Balochistan National Party – Mengal (BPN-M) have announced their boycott.

The first two are a part of the All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM), which has announced a boycott at the national level against Gen Musharraf and his policies. The last two – JWP and BPN-M are Balochi parties belonging to Akbar Bugti and Sardar Akhtar Mengal and are boycotting against the treatment meted out to their leaders. Bugti was killed in a military action, while Mengal has been imprisoned under bogus pretext.

The boycott of these moderate regional Pashtun and Balochi parties is likely to witness a low voter turn out. It would be the religious parties, especially the JUI-F and PML-Q that are likely to win; the percentage of votes they secure in the final count will remain immaterial in the electoral calculus.

Though, the JUI-F is split inside the province on the eve of elections, the split is not likely to be the major factor in deciding the overall outcome in Balochistan - a non-representative government at the provincial level and the lack of genuine voices in the Parliament. More than for the elections 2008, the outcome is likely to create further problems in the forthcoming years, in terms of further alienation and increased violence

North West Frontier Province (NWFP)

NWFP also presents a curious picture like Balochistan. Elections in the NWFP, historically have always been polarized with four segments fighting for the national and provincial assembly. Led by the regional parties – mainly the the Awami National Party (ANP), religious parties (though JUI-F is strong overall inside the NWFP, there are pockets, which support the Jamaat-e-Islami), the Muslim Leagues? Plural? and finally the PPP and its factions, especially the PPP-Sherpao.

Due to massive rigging and the split inside the ANP during 2002, the regional parties, for the first time since 1970, could not win even a single seat for the National Assembly from the NWFP. On the other hand, the religious parties polled maximum number of votes and secured maximum seats in their electoral history – 29 seats (out of the total 35 from NWFP) for the Parliament and 55 seats (out of the total 99) for the Provincial Assembly.

There is a lot of resentment amongst the Pashtun community against Islamabad and President Musharraf for his policies vis-à-vis the War on Terrorism and the continuing violence all over NWFP and the FATA. The local population is also extremely unhappy with the performance of the MMA in the last five years. The society is clearly polarized in terms of support and opposition for the jihad led by the Taliban radical elements.

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The pashtun society is clearly polarized in terms of support and opposition for the jihad led by the Taliban radical elements. However, there is an overarching anti-American feeling and support for the pashtuns in Afghanistan vis-à-vis the Northern Alliance members

Who is likely to encash these anti-American votes and anti-Musharraf votes in the NWFP? Will it be the religious parties, especially the JUI-F or the ANP along with PPP and PML-N? In the 1997 elections, ANP, PPP and PML-N captured roughly 65 per centage of the votes polled and 25 seats for the

National Assembly. In 2002 elections, the MMM captured 46 percentage of the votes polled and 29 seats. Who is likely to repeat, which performance? JUI-F has an edge, by default of the prevailing anti-American sentiments and the ongoing War on Terrorism in the FATA

Punjab

Punjab, the most important province in Pakistan, presents the most complicated picture. With 150 elected seats for the National Assembly (more than rest of the provinces placed together), Punjabi vote has always been the decider of the National Assembly.

If the rigging is relatively low, the PPP and PML-N, based on their previous performance is likely to secure not less than 90-100 seats all over Punjab. Such a performance in Punjab and Sindh, is likely to result in the PPP and PML-N winning maximum number of seats and certainly securing 40-50 percent of the votes polled.

Before attempting to forecast how the Punjabis are likely to vote in this election, an analysis of previous elections is important. First, the Punjabi vote is not uniform, throughout the province – they are divided in terms of northern, central, western and southern Punjab.

While the northern and central Punjabs are urbanized and industrialized, the western and southern Punjabs remain relatively feudal even today. Second, the urbanized and industrialized Punjabis from the north and central predominantly voted along with the Establishment. In other words, they have always voted for those parties and individuals which had the support of the Establishment. They have never wasted their votes and made sure, that they voted the party that is likely to form the government. Third, since 1988 elections, there has been a gradual decline in the percentage of votes secured by the PPP from Punjab, especially southern parts. During the last two decades, the PML-N has been consolidating

against the declining PPP votes.

Based on the above basic calculations, how is Punjab likely to vote? Today, anti-Musharraf sentiments remain the highest in Punjab. Sacking of Iftikhar Chaudhary and the lawyers' movement has mobilized the Punjabis against the present regime led by PML-Q and Musharraf. Curiously, over the last few weeks, Gen Kayani, the Chief of Army Staff took numerous steps, distancing from the political crisis. While one could predict the better performance of the PPP in the southern Punjab, how central and northern Punjab will vote, is likely to decide the election outcome. Nawaz Sharif is no more the outcast, he was during 2002-03. Will the anti-Musharraf vote, in these regions help Nawaz Sharif, his bete noire, thus voting against what the Establishment want?

Despite, the above calculations, if the rigging is relatively low, one could expect the PPP and PML-N, based on their previous performance (except 2002 elections) securing not less than 90-100 seats all over Punjab. Such a performance in Punjab and Sindh, is likely to result in the PPP and PML-N winning maximum number of seats and certainly securing 40-50 percent of the votes polled.

That is, if elections are held on 18 February. And if the elections are relatively free and fair.

D SUBA CHANDRAN is an Assistant Director and REKHA CHARAVARTHI is a Research Officer at the IPCS.



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE
AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B 7/3 Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi 110029 INDIA