



Impending Elections in Pakistan

PR Chari
Director, IPCS

These forthcoming elections need analysis against the backdrop of Pakistan's recent political history. It witnessed a coup by Nawaz Sharif leading to the counter-coup by Pervez Musharraf, which installed a military dictatorship in Pakistan. This was a 'normal' development since Pakistan has had spells of effete civilian rule followed by military coups and long periods when the military held the reins of government. The contributions of Iskander Mirza, Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan and Zia-ul-Huq to this sad history can be usefully recalled. For that matter the military has always been the power behind the throne. This was apparent when Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were playing musical chairs, with the real power behind their shaky thrones being the Chief of Army Staff, who sent them packing whenever he had no further use for them. Whilst acting as a Praetorian guard, therefore the military has always controlled vital aspects of Pakistan's security policy like Kashmir, defence budget and the nuclear option. More recently, a hypothesis has been promoted by the military that it has a duty (self-imposed) to supervise the civilian government since the politicians are wholly inadequate for this job in Pakistan.

Legality has never been an issue in the politics of Pakistan. Under the Provisional Constitution Order issued by Musharraf to 'legalise' his coup, the 1973 Constitution was abrogated, although Article 6 thereof specifically provides that any effort to abrogate it amounted to treason. All actions taken after this travesty could be deemed legal if the Provisional Constitution Order and the abrogation of the Constitution of Pakistan is also deemed legal. Disconcertingly, the Supreme Court of Pakistan found this action by Musharraf legal by invoking the 'doctrine of

necessity'. Earlier military dictators had also issued Provisional Constitutional Orders. Earlier Supreme Courts had also endorsed their issue by invoking the 'doctrine of necessity'.

Consequently, the judiciary was as responsible for the 'murder of democracy' in Pakistan as the military. That said, the latest amendments to the Constitution permitting the President to dismiss the Prime Minister takes Pakistan back to the Zia regime and his infamous 8th amendment which devised a system of governance that would perpetuate Musharraf and the military in effective power.

There is, however, the conundrum of the general population in Pakistan, sick of civilian rule and its venal ministers and intriguing politicians, actually welcoming military rule with great joyousness. If this seems inexplicable, so must their present dissatisfaction with military rule, which is quite normal in the democracies of the world, wherein the turning out of one party and bringing in another to power is greeted with great relief and happiness. Some part of the current Pakistani disillusionment with Pervez Musharraf stems from the economy remaining stagnant, the much-favoured jihadis and religious parties being angry about the post 9/11 somersault in Musharraf's Afghanistan policy, and his less-than-credible referendum seeking to consolidate his Presidential seat. Several questions arise for consideration against this backdrop that has relevance to the pre-poll and post-poll situation in Pakistan. The most important issues are:

Will these elections be free and fair?

Pre-poll actions by the military government would hardly inspire any confidence in the forthcoming elections being held in a free and fair manner. Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto have been

eliminated from contesting them by laws specifically designed to keep them out, like the prohibition of two-term Prime Ministers from contesting. Nazims (Government servants), on the other hand, are allowed to contest and have been provided public funds to influence the elections. Shahbaz Sharif, Nawaz's brother, was made head of the PML (N), but his nomination was rejected on technical grounds after initially being accepted. A King's party has been formed enjoying open Government patronage. The CEC passes orders but is unable to get them implemented. The list is endless, but a foreboding is irresistible that the elections are unlikely to be credible or free or fair, since the military is still unsure, of getting the election results it wants despite stacking the cards in its favour.

Will these elections make a difference to the way Pakistan is ruled thereafter?

That the military will continue to be the dominating presence in the background of Pakistani polity is a foregone conclusion. The establishment of a National Defence Committee to oversee the working of the civilian government will consolidate the President's hold on power, but emasculate the civilian government. Designating this arrangement as establishing a Turkish model does injustice to this form of governance; what obtains in Pakistan is an unvarnished military dictatorship with the trappings of democracy. This will continue after the elections, and Pakistan will be ruled, post-elections, in the same manner as it has always been.

Are these elections of any especial importance to Pakistan? And to India?

The forthcoming elections can therefore be dismissed as being of little importance to Pakistan and to India, since the present dispensation will continue unchanged. Indeed, it would consolidate Pervez Musharraf in power as having installed a civilian government, however feeble and irrelevant. This will provide him the fig-leaf that would be eagerly seized upon by the United States and its allies to hail the return of democracy to Pakistan. Hence these elections and the nature of the post-elections government in Pakistan offers little hope to India of better days dawning, since Pakistan's Kashmir policy will remain unaffected. So the proxy war would continue with the United States continuing its exhortations that cross-border

terrorism should stop and Pakistan continuing with its business-as-usual policy. A less Manichaeian view would suggest that post-elections (the first since 9/11 when the geopolitics of the region changed dramatically), Pakistan would find it even more difficult to sustain its dichotomous policy of supporting the war against terrorism in Afghanistan and its own tribal areas but supporting cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. U.S. and European pressure on the civilian government would widen the cleavage between it and the military, and the prevailing circumstances would make it impossible for Pervez Musharraf to adopt the familiar device of dismissing the government if it did not suit his purposes.

Can a groundswell of opinion be discerned in Pakistan that favours a change in its dismal polity?

Pakistan is seen by Indian commentators in terms of stereotypes, the vice versa is also true. We know so little about Pakistan. Despite the amount of energy spent in writing and talking about Pakistan, the quantum of scholarly attention it receives is pathetically negligible. Little is known, for instance, about its internal political dynamics. Hardly anyone reads its Urdu press. Discerning alternative opinion in Pakistan requires an ear finely attuned to the nuances in its public discourse. Indian ears are deaf to them. Matters are made worse by their being no real contacts between the people in the two countries. A greater understanding of Pakistan would permit better answers to be found to all these troubling issues.



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B 7/3 Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi 110029 INDIA
Tel: 91-11-4100 1900