

Assessing Pakistan's Election

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Something very positive just happened in “the most dangerous country in the world.” Pakistan surprised the chorus of pundits who predicted the parliamentary elections held on February 18, 2008, would not be credible, and the public reaction would turn violent.

Instead, Pakistan made history. For the first time in its tumultuous history, a military dictator participated in the peaceful transition to civilian government through democratic elections. To his credit, President Pervez Musharraf responded to internal and international pressure to lift Emergency Rule and to step down as Chief of Army Staff.

Nothing is ever as simple as it appears. Just before he relinquished his position as Chief of Army Staff, President Musharraf imposed Emergency Rule. Some call it a military coup. He used the month-long period of Emergency Rule from November 3 to December 15 to change the constitution by fiat in order to remove provisions that made him ineligible to continue as president. His widespread crackdown on independent journalists, judges and lawyers intimidated liberal democratic voices in Pakistan that championed rule of law and democracy.* During Emergency Rule, he also sacked the Supreme Court Chief Iftikhar Chaudhry (who is still under house arrest) and required other judges to take a loyalty oath, leading to the dismissal of some 60 judges. In addition, he assured the Electoral Commission was stacked with his loyalists so that irregularities in the upcoming election would go unheeded. It is no wonder most analysts predicted Election Day rigging would assure Musharraf's party, the Pakistan Muslim League, Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q), a large number of seats in the National Assembly.

Those predictions were wrong. Instead, the voters dealt a crushing defeat to President Musharraf and his party. His five-year term as president has just begun, but the opposition will form the government. Leading opposition party leaders, particularly Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz Sharif faction (PML-N), are loudly calling for Musharraf's removal.

The public also repudiated the radical message of Pakistan's religious parties. The Assembly of Islamic Clergy/Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) party did strikingly poorly at the ballot box in the Northwest Frontier Province where the militant jihadists are waging war

* *Editor's Note: On March 25, 2008, The New York Times reported that the newly chosen Prime Minister of Pakistan, Yousaf Raza Gillani, of the Pakistan Peoples Party “immediately released [on March 24] the judges detained by President Pervez Musharraf when he imposed emergency rule last year...[T]he new Prime Minister...also said he would seek a formal United Nations inquiry into the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister killed after a speech on December 27.”*

on the Pakistani government and army. The people courageously supported the secular Pushtun party, the Awami National Party (ANP). It is not surprising that extremists who cannot win support at the ballot box step up the pressure on society through terrorist acts. The recent suicide attacks on Pakistan's Naval School and bombings throughout Lahore and Islamabad are examples of a growing and alarming campaign against the government, military establishment and foreigners by a very small but determined isolated minority.**

Two major events intervened to "level the playing field" for elections.

First, the tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto plunged the nation into a crisis. National mourning soon turned to anger at the Musharraf administration. Fairly or not, 65 percent of the population blamed Musharraf for her death.

Second, President Musharraf lost his most solid political base, the army, when he took off his uniform. The newly appointed Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Kiyani, is attuned to growing concerns that the public is turning against the army. Army leaders worry that the population believes the army is becoming too political and resented for the extensive privileges it enjoyed under Musharraf's government. They fear the wider public blames Musharraf and the army for being drawn into the Global War on Terrorism at the behest of the United States. A growing number of soldiers feel the army is made to target its own citizens along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, resulting in too many civilian casualties.

General Kiyani moved swiftly to try to restore the traditional role of the army and its respected relationship with the public. He limited contact between the general officer corps and President Musharraf, he started withdrawing army officers from high-level positions in civilian ministries and as heads of parastatal industries, and he assured the army would not be the instrument of rigging elections at polling stations on the day of the elections. Finally, the army has started to reevaluate operations along the border that result in civilian deaths.

The election made Pakistani history in another significant way. The two largest parties, the left of center Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), headed by Benazir Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, and the right of center PML-N, led by Nawaz Sharif, formed a coalition government. In the past, these two parties would trade power but have never before joined forces. Optimists hope for a more solid government coalition. Both Zardari and Nawaz Sharif must overcome personal legal issues and a reputation for corruption, but most Pakistanis are now willing to give the new civilian government their initial support.

** *Editor's Note: According to The New York Times of March 12, 2008, "two powerful explosions in suicide attacks minutes apart rocked the eastern city of Lahore on [March 11], killing 24 people...The first blast ripped through the regional office of the Federal Investigation Agency...In the second attack, several miles away, two people drove a small pickup truck to a house being used as an office for an advertising company in Model Town, an upscale residential neighborhood...They exploded themselves and the truck, destroying the front of the house, damaging neighboring buildings and killing three people...Model Town is where many senior politicians, including Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of the slain opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, and Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-N, maintain homes."*

The successful Pakistan elections are loaded with lessons for the United States as we pursue our interests to assure a stable, prosperous region.

First, we do our friends great harm by taking a public position of support for individual Pakistani politicians. For example, Benazir Bhutto lost a great deal of popular support last summer when the United States intervened to encourage negotiations with Musharraf. The Pakistani public saw this as “American meddling.” President Musharraf’s popularity sank to rock bottom levels, i.e. around 15 percent, partly because our officials lauded him as “indispensable.” Instead, we should support the larger democratic process, rather than individuals or parties. Secretary Rice got it right in her Congressional testimony when she said our relations are with the Pakistani people.

Second, the Northwest Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the rugged Afghan border are some of the most impoverished regions of Pakistan. The people voted to turn out the more extremist parties in favor of the secular, but mostly because the defeated Islamic Party, the JUI, did little to provide basic services over the past several years. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) should channel significant assistance through the newly democratically-elected officials so that there is a visible improvement in the security and quality of life of the people.

Third, Americans throughout the world are respected for our core values of democracy, equality and justice. We must stand on those values in our relations with Pakistan. Specifically, we must support the rule of law. When it is attacked, as it was with the arrests of the Supreme Court Justice, judges and lawyers, we should speak out in defense of an independent judiciary. No single message from the United States would be more unwelcome to the moderate democratic voices in Pakistan than an endorsement for the reinstatement of the pre-Emergency Rule Supreme Court. The United States has struck the right note in calling for free and fair elections, return to civilian democracy and lifting of Emergency Rule. We have yet to send the final, most critical message on support of an independent judiciary.

In conclusion, the election of February 18 supports the view that the vast majority of Pakistanis reject extremism for moderation, and prefer civilian democracy over military rule. The new government faces serious challenges to be sure. Attacks on government and military installations by a small but violent group of extremists will continue to present grave challenges to stability. The new civilian government also must rise above its own history of corruption and incompetence and work to build a new social compact to bring services to some of the most impoverished peoples in the region. The United States has a great deal at stake on the new government’s success.