

Pakistan's Post-Election Fault Lines

By Rashed Rahman

The political tensions threatening to destabilize Pakistan seemed to reach explosive proportions with the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December. Still, the elections, though postponed, finally took place in February. Pakistani journalist Rashed Rahman takes stock of what might lie ahead.

A LOT OF POLITICAL PUNDITS had to eat their words after the February 18 general elections in Pakistan. Held in the tragic shadow of Benazir Bhutto's December 27 assassination, there were many apprehensions surrounding an election that many analysts were convinced would determine the future of Pakistan. When the original scheduled date of January 8 was cancelled and the polls postponed to February 18, ostensibly because of the riots that broke out after Bhutto's assassination, there was fear that President Pervez Musharraf might not allow the elections to go forward in a climate that allowed the assassinated leader's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to ride what was dubbed the "sympathy wave."

That possibility obviously was worrisome for the pro-Musharraf coalition led by the Pakistan Muslim League [PML(Q)], the "King's party" that owed its origins and rise to the political machinations of Musharraf following the 1999 military coup. While the PPP and other opposition parties, including former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League [PML(N)], insisted they were prepared for elections on January 8, Musharraf postponed the polls, perhaps calculating that the fury over the assassination would have abated by February.

The ruling coalition's fears were well-founded. In Punjab, the political and economic powerhouse of the country with 56 percent of the total population, the PPP held onto its expected 88 seats, mostly concentrated in its traditional stronghold in the southern, less developed reaches of the province. While the ruling PML(Q) lost heavily in the central areas

of Punjab, consisting largely of the agricultural heartland of the country, it also was routed in many of its favored constituencies in Punjab's northern hilly Potohar Plateau, traditionally the recruiting ground for the armed forces. The once mighty King's party finished third with just 41 seats in the National Assembly. Its original mother party, the PML(N), many of whose leaders defected to form the bulk of what became the PML(Q) after the 1999 coup, made a strong showing in the areas of its greatest influence, the central Canal Colonies of Punjab. Virtually written off during Nawaz Sharif's seven years of forced exile, his party romped home with 66 seats. While the PPP's success went according to script, the unexpectedly strong showing of the PML(N) and the rout of the PML(Q) truly reflected the turning away of a considerable section of the electorate from Musharraf and his political allies.

The biggest surprise — and one welcomed by liberal secularists — was the cutting down to size of the religious parties that had fought the 2002 general elections under the umbrella of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) alliance, a grouping of six religious parties, the foremost being the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Jamiat-e-Ulema-i-Islam [JUI(F)]. Both had their main strength in the North West Frontier Province, where they formed a provincial coalition government after the 2002 elections. With the JI having abandoned the electoral contest in favor of a boycott, the JUI(F) was the main religious party on February 18. It too suffered an ignominious defeat in the Frontier Province and in the restive province of Balochistan in favor of the secular Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) and the PPP. Having been part of coalition governments in both provinces since 2002, the JUI(F) suffered as its constituency turned away due to the internal rifts and virtual paralysis of the MMA.

A major factor in the results was also the absence of systematic vote rigging. The general perception in Pakistan is that the military, now under the command of Musharraf's successor, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, foiled massive

cheating this time in contrast to the 2002 elections. Some selective rigging did take place on polling day, but this was more due to local factors rather than a grand design at the national level.

The election was a wholesale rejection of the Musharraf dispensation. Morally, the president should have seen the writing on the wall the morning after and decided to leave with whatever dignity he could still salvage. However, the post-elections signs are that he is adamant in clinging to power and even has dreams of serving out his full five-year term. The problem, however, is that none of the political parties, with the exception of his own PML(Q), accepts that his election in uniform in November 2007 was legitimate.

REINSTATING THE JUDICIARY

It needs to be recalled that it was the fear that the Supreme Court, under ousted Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudry, was about to deliver a negative verdict on his eligibility as a presidential candidate in uniform that prompted Musharraf to impose the short-lived state-of-emergency on November 3, 2007. Under the emergency Musharraf sacked 60 Supreme Court and High Court judges.

The parties sharing the new mandate would certainly like to see the back of Musharraf as soon as possible. In particular, Nawaz Sharif sees Musharraf as the nemesis who overthrew his elected government in 1999, but the other parties also view him as a usurper who has clung to power for over eight years through sleight of hand, manipulation and, where necessary, repression.

But getting rid of Musharraf is not as simple as the election results may indicate, especially in the face of his intransigence and maneuvering. The US and the Pakistan military would like a smooth transition to the new dispensation without disturbing Musharraf or otherwise upsetting the applecart. Privately, US diplomats in Pakistan concede that Musharraf's days may be numbered, but they prefer a gradual "fading away" of the old soldier rather than a sudden cataclysm. Despite the fact that the military un-

1 One of the troubling aspects for Zardari had been the fate at the hands of the restored judges of the National Reconciliation Ordinance promulgated by Musharraf towards the end of last year as part of whatever understanding he reached with Bhutto regarding her return home after eight years of self-imposed exile to escape prosecution on an array of corruption charges. The ordinance provided a blanket amnesty for all wrongdoers

between 1996 and 2007. The Chaudry Supreme Court had stayed its implementation and called the ordinance illegal, but was yet to hear the case when it was sent packing. Zardari was let off the hook by the new Supreme Court packed by Musharraf with pliant judges, and he now fears that a restored court may well subject him once again to being dragged through the courts on corruption charges, despite his having already spent eight years in jail after the removal of Bhutto's second government in 1996.

der General Kiyani, is inclined to do some damage control and face saving by distancing itself publicly from politics, they have signaled that they still support the continuation of Musharraf as president, at least so far. His removal could possibly come about in two ways. If the deposed judiciary is restored, the rejuvenated Supreme Court under Chief Justice Chaudry could conceivably strike down his emergency declaration and all the steps, such as the power to amend the Constitution, Musharraf has used to indemnify his actions since November 3, 2007, including his election while still Chief of Army Staff.

This is the route preferred by Nawaz Sharif, since it is the quickest way to get rid of the president. While the PPP, under Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, initially appeared less than enthusiastic about the restoration of the deposed judges, a surprise announcement on March 9 of a deal with Sharif to form a coalition government and reinstate the ousted judges seems to clear the way for the eventual clipping of Musharraf's once-powerful wings. "We feel that the country is on the verge of making history. This was also the desire of Benazir Bhutto and we also intend to stick to the road to democracy; we are aware of the problems that the country is facing," Zardari said when the deal was announced.¹

The only other viable method of removing Musharraf is through impeachment, which requires a two-thirds majority in the Assembly and the Senate. While negotiations with potential allies have already yielded a two-thirds majority for a potential ruling coalition, the opposition parties do not enjoy a two-thirds majority in the Senate, half of whose members will next stand for election in March 2009.

COPING WITH JIHAD

The victorious parties will also have to tackle the legacy of troubles from the Musharraf years. The

country faces a growing threat from religious extremist terrorism that has spilled over from Afghanistan and the tribal areas to envelope the entire country. The elections passed without a major terrorist incident on polling day, but immediately after February 18, the terrorists announced a return to their macabre trade through a series of suicide and other bombings in various parts of the country. The terrorist network has expanded to include not only al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, it also now boasts of a nexus with local Pakistani Taliban and most if not all of the Kashmiri jihadi groups that had been in suspended animation since 9/11.

To meet this threat requires close collaboration between the military, other security services and the incoming civilian government. The counter-insurgency effort in past years suffered on account of the weakness of the Musharraf civilian government. The hope now is that the efforts of the incoming government may yield better dividends in dealing with the complexities of an anti-terrorism campaign that requires a judicious mix of military action, improved intelligence, political initiatives and negotiations at the local level. Development also must be brought to the underdeveloped tribal areas, while the religious seminaries, or madrassas, need to be brought under control to prevent them from being the theological breeding ground for brainwashed young suicide bombers.

The nationalist insurgency in the province of Balochistan also begs for a political solution, as opposed to Musharraf's pig-headed insistence on the use of force to quell aspirations for provincial autonomy. Zardari of the PPP has taken the initiative to apologize to the people of Balochistan for past and present injustices and repression, a welcome move that opens the door for the PPP to lead a genuine coalition government in the province.

In the other three provinces, the situation is somewhat less complicated. In Sindh, the PPP's stronghold in the rural areas has guaranteed it can form the provincial government on its own. However, there are still negotiations going on with the urban-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) on whether it will join a PPP-led coalition. The NWFP will see an ANP-led coalition. Punjab will go to a PML(N)-led coalition. It remains to be seen whether this mixed mandate can be managed by the anti-Musharraf political forces. If stable governments are formed in the center and in the provinces, it will be a uniquely positive development in Pakistan's history. There are, however, plenty of skeptics who believe that even if the difficult bargaining yields the desired result, there are few guarantees it will last.

damental historical, social and cultural roots. Carved out of the Indian subcontinent at the time of independence from British colonialism in 1947, Pakistan is a state that has failed even 60 years after its creation to resolve fundamental questions such as the *raison d'être* for its coming into being. It has failed to provide the means for national integration, and the evolution of a new identity that moves away from a purely negative anti-India one.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League that spearheaded the movement for Muslim rights in the subcontinent within the context of the negotiated departure of the British, tragically reflected the pressures that produced Partition and its accompanying communal bloodbath. Starting his political career as a secular nationalist who was dubbed the

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The much trumpeted economic turnaround under Musharraf has suddenly, in the last few months, yielded its own crop of troubles. Rising international oil prices, unemployment, galloping inflation, with food prices leading the way and hitting the common citizen hardest, and mismanagement of staples such as wheat have all converged to soil the claims of an economic resurgence under Musharraf and former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (who was not awarded a ticket by the PML(Q) this time around and has repaired abroad to set up a private business).

BEWILDERING POLITICS

The bewildering complexities of Pakistan's post-election scenario, as outlined above, have fun-

“Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity,” Jinnah chose self-exile to protest what he perceived as Mahatma Gandhi's injection of religious symbolism into the politics of the independence movement. Yet Jinnah himself subsequently succumbed to the mobilizing power of religion to excite his scattered and disorganized Muslim community and to gain a better negotiating hand against the Congress Party. There is a long-continuing debate about whether Jinnah meant what he said when he appealed to Muslim sentiment during the independence movement from 1935 onwards. By August 11, 1947, his address to the new Constituent Assembly of Pakistan was a reassertion of secular values, but it proved too little too late to stem the momentum of religion

underpinning the character of the new state. After his death in 1948, and in the midst of conflict and tensions with India over Kashmir, his successors introduced religious principles as the basis of the polity in successive Constitutions.

It should not come as a surprise therefore that during the Afghan war of the 1980s, the military dictator at the time, General Ziaul Haq, found fertile ground for promoting a religious identity for Pakistani state and society, a maneuver that had the added advantage of justifying support for religious extremists in the jihad against the Soviet occupiers and local communists in Afghanistan. Since at least 9/11, the blowback from the promotion of jihadis in Afghanistan has nearly brought Pakistan to its knees.

Pakistan's original élan being vague, the post-independence polity soon succumbed to the relatively overdeveloped military and bureaucratic institutions inherited from the British. The ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity of the regions that came to constitute the new state carved out of the subcontinent was ignored under the attempt to forge a purely Muslim identity. It is this failure to recognize diversity and the attempt to centralize power and privilege in the hands of a narrow elite largely drawn from Punjab that led to the bloody breakaway of Bangladesh in 1971. It is the same pre-conceived, artificially constructed "integrationist" view that has led to five military operations and armed resistance in Balochistan, in addition to unrest in Sindh and the NWFP.

The idealism of a welfare state that punctuated the Muslim League's appeal to the Muslims of undivided India has gone begging. The military-bureaucratic oligarchy easily co-opted a civilian feudal and industrial elite fattened on the concessions and crumbs of state largesse. The people of Pakistan, meanwhile, have suffered great disappointment and disillusionment because of neglect, denial of their political, economic and social rights by the ruling oligarchy, and the misery that only real poverty can visit. There may have existed an implicit political contract between the state and its people when Pakistan was created, but even this political

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contract has been practiced only in the breach. Of a social contract, the less said the better; its conspicuous absence being a continuing reality for the people.

Unless the February 18 elections lead to a sustainable civilian democratic political dispensation that allows space for the unfulfilled aspirations of the country's citizens, nationalities and the poor, the state's internal tensions and external difficulties are likely to rip it apart.

Rashed Rahman is the former editor of the Pakistani daily newspaper, *The Post*.


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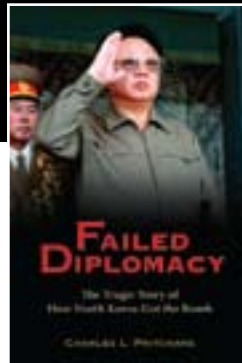
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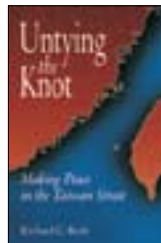
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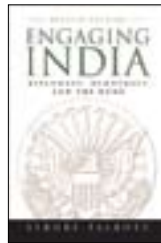
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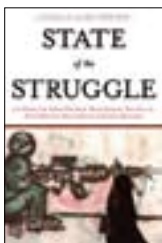
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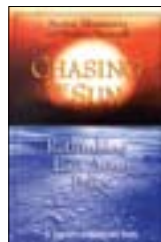
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