

Pakistan: The Boycott Revisited

Wednesday 9 April 2008, by [SHEHRBANO ZIA Afiya](#), [ZAIDI S. Akbar](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2008).

MANY of us, who come from very different backgrounds - academics, analysts, activists, citizens - argued over the course of October and November last year that civil society actors and political parties ought to boycott the elections which were announced by Gen Pervez Musharraf, and which were eventually held on Feb 18.

It was clear that once the term of the Shaukat Aziz government came to an end, elections would be held to elect a new parliament.

In the closing months of last year, political groupings like the All Parties Democratic Movement and the Pakistan Muslim League-N announced that they would not contest the polls, primarily because they felt that the elections would be neither free nor fair, and nor were these parties willing to accept any rules of the game announced by the uniformed general-president.

The efficacy of the decision depended much on whether the Pakistan People's Party would also come on board and hence give some credence to the boycott call. Many were sceptical that if either of the two largest parties chose to participate in the elections, they would gain legitimacy and those who boycotted would be left out of the political process.

Eventually, both the two largest parties agreed to contest an election which resulted in a resounding victory for the anti-Musharraf political forces and put Pakistan on the way to a military-free democratic future. Today, we can all celebrate the democratic process and look back and say that the decision to contest was the best decision that political parties could have taken.

Two weeks into the swearing-in of the new parliament, it seems that almost all the fears and concerns that the boycotters were allaying have been proven to be wrong. The judges are free, and are likely to be reinstated, and

President Musharraf just might be pressurised into make some sort of hurried exit. The script could not have been written any better and democracy seems to have triumphed over all other forms of politics.

Having said this, it would be naïve to think that the parties are taking these steps in a vacuum. There is no ignoring the momentum and uncompromised push for these demands coming consistently from the lawyers' movement, civil society and perhaps within the parties too. In fact, rather than waiting detachedly for some unproven exercise of sovereignty from parliament, the people chose to actively vote out the government and then exerted continued political pressure for their demands to be met.

It is only a small section of those we call the 'apologists' within and outside the political parties who seek to dilute principles and encourage leaders to backtrack on promises for their personal gain, and who call democratic pressure a 'confrontation'.

Those of us who were in favour of the election boycott were under no illusions that we were anywhere near a revolutionary situation similar to France in 1789, or even 1968, but felt that a boycott by the main political actors would put enough pressure on the Musharraf government where it would have to back down and make major concessions. The lawyers' movement was still vibrant, and the Nov 3 martial law and the playing with the constitution under the PCO energised and united diverse sections of civil society and political actors as well.

We were confident that had the PPP joined the lawyers' struggle and been more active in its anti-Musharraf politics rather than indulging in deals, perhaps the general may have been forced out earlier. The boycott decision was based on a reading of the limited strength of the street, and had the two largest parties participated we could have been near an Indonesia- or Philippines-like situation where political power overthrew authoritarianism.

We will never know what would have happened if both the PPP and the PML-N had agreed in November 2007 to work together to boycott the polls. If

agreements and a workable coalition can be formed after the election, a more uncertain and unstable agreement could have been possible in agreeing to boycott. However, we will never know.

While the boycott decision may have become far less important as the numbers who supported the move dwindled, and more and more political actors and civil society representatives decided to contest or support the elections, if nothing else the boycott issue did raise the level of debate and exchange in the political public arena.

While there was a complete consensus in condemning the martial law imposed on Nov 3, and there was continued support for the lawyers' movement with the reinstatement of the judges a real demand, the divisions amongst those who were in favour of boycotting the elections and those who supported participation raised the level of discourse in the Urdu and English press manifold. There was a lively debate not seen since the time of the 1999 coup - and even that was rather one-sided, in favour of the coup. The op-ed pages of all major newspapers had raised the level of debate and argumentation to a lively level not seen in many years. The otherwise dry and staid political public sphere had come alive.

This taste for political debate acquired by the media has also been simultaneously attributed to Gen Musharraf's personal largesse and equally dismissed as cacophonous laundry washing by the elite. The point of democratic choices and transparency, as articulated by the fourth estate, needs to be dealt with carefully now on. There should be no calls for going soft on the new parliament simply because it is nebulous in its formation. The democratic role of the media must by definition be challenging and expository rather than conciliatory and uncritical.

Many of us who supported the boycott decision are now happy to have been proven wrong, and support the larger democratic process to further strengthen and deepen both democracy and civil society. We recognise, however, the role of the movements which helped bring about this new democratisation in Pakistan beyond electoral politics. We hope that the processes under way and the promises made will move towards a further fruition of democracy with the reinstatement of

the pre-Nov 3 judiciary and with the removal of the former general-president who was resoundingly defeated in the Feb 18 elections.

Those who argued for the elections boycott now need to organise themselves democratically to fulfil the unfinished agenda of democratisation in Pakistan and to ensure that these tasks are accomplished. Clearly, democracy has to be taken far further than before and needs to be strengthened. If parliament is to be sovereign - the new mantra of the elected representatives - the role of those outside the assembly has to be one which ensures that parliamentarians accomplish their democratic mandate.

And if they don't state or tackle the peoples' issues due to fear of being de-tracked, then it is our work to set the agenda for them - on behalf of the electorate, not the elected. While happy to have been proven wrong over the boycott decision, we would hate to turn around a hundred days later to say, 'we told you so'.

P.S.

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