

Pakistan: The Balance Sheet of Boycott strategy and PPP government

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The All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM) boycotted the general elections on the appeal of the Pakistan Bar Council, arguing that "After 3 November 2007 imposition of emergency, most of the top judges have been suspended and put under house arrest. The measure is mainly to stop the top judges from making a decision on General Musharaf's election as president. This is also to ensure that the regime gets favorable results from future general elections."

The Pakistan Peoples Party was the first party to declare that it would not observe the boycott. Benazir Bhutto Shaheed had returned to Pakistan and earlier had held several rounds of talks with the military dictatorship about power sharing in a new government. Unlike past political tradition, these talks were open and regularly commented upon in the mainstream media.

Mian Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) initially joined the boycott camp. But Nawaz Sharif decided to take part in the election, offering the argument that he could not leave the field open to other major parties, like the PPP and Awami National Party (ANP), which opted to participate.

The argument put forth by the PPP, ANP and PMLN in favor of participating was based on using the elections to get rid of the General Musharraf's military dictatorship. The APDM did not buy the argument but said the fraud election that would be used to legitimize the dictatorship. It argued that a mass movement alongside the lawyer's movement would rid the country of the dictatorship.

Both camps started their campaign, one arguing to boycott and other saying that the elections would be rigged. Dozens of press conferences and public statements by the PPP and PMLN leadership warned that the Musharraf regime was making plans to rig the elections. Benazir Bhutto constantly repeated this charge. For their part, the APDM, in their massive public rallies, threatened that if the regime rigged the election, a mass movement will immediately respond.

Ten days before the elections, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated. With the Musharaf regime unable to provide the necessary security for the PPP's top leader, the massive outpouring crystallized as anti-Musharaf sentiment. Had the PPP leadership demanded Musharaf's immediate resignation, he would have had no option but to go.

However, the day following Benazir's assassination, Amin Fahim, senior vice chairperson of the PPP, announced that there will be no emotional decision about participating in the elections. Three days later, the PPP leadership announced their decision to participate in the election. Their political agenda was to work alongside Musharaf, and share power with him, not to get rid of him. Their decision to go ahead with the election put water on the fire and worked to pacify the mood of rebellion.

Added to the political crisis, following Benazir's assassination, was a economic crisis. Combining one of the worse shortages of electricity, gas and wheat flour with a massive price hike on all food, and tripling of the price of cooking oil, convinced many to oppose General Musharaf.

The APDM boycott appeal met differently at different places. In Punjab and Sind, it did not have much effect and people went to poll to defeat Musharaf. The MQM, using its neo-fascist tactics, was able to hold on in Karachi but the rest of Musharaf's supporters were defeated.

In Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), where religious fundamentalists have been in power since the 2002 elections, the boycott campaign was able to break up the MMA alliance of religious fundamentalists. Believed to be work of several intelligence agencies, the alliance initially appeared to some as an anti-imperialist platform, and thus gave false hope to many. But the alliance was shattered under the heat of boycott as the Jamaat Islami (JI) joined the APDM.

While the JUI of Fazal Rehman, closely associated with the Musharaf regime, wanted to take part in the elections, the JI was under the immense pressure of lawyer's movement and opted to boycott. The strategy of the religious fundamentalist forces having a united voice proved impossible to maintain.

Some commentators have concluded that the rejection of Musharraf regime in the general election indicates the boycott campaign was useless. Others argued that it paved the way for the victory of the PMLQ, Musharaf's supporters, in Baluchistan. Still others concluded that the boycott campaign aided Musharaf's supporters in the elections. But all these arguments have been washed away with the political development unfolding in Pakistan today.

The boycott campaign helped the anti-Musharaf votes to be shared by only three political parties, PPP, PMLN and ANP. The balance sheet of the boycott campaign reveals the PPP to be in power at the center. It shares power with other parties in all four provinces.

However, in Baluchistan it is forming a government of its own, with a lone opposition member. Yet it was here that the APDM was accused of bringing Musharaf supporters to power! Had the powerful nationalist parties of Baluchistan taken part in the elections, PPP might have taken one or two seats at the most in the province.

Who helps who is now very clear? The masses supported PPP and PMLN ANP against Musharaf and now, the PPP leadership is making alliances with the pro Musharaf parties like MQM. This shows very clearly the future trends of politics.

Subsequent to the installation of the new government at the Centre, Ahmad Mukhtar, the foreign minister and PPP leader, told a private television channel on 3 April 2008 that his party will work with Musharaf and announced that, in fact, Musharaf has introduced some good policies to curb the growing incidents of terrorism.

By announcing some radical measures, restoring trade unions and student unions, upping the minimum wage of 6000 Rupees (\$100) a month and not saying a single word against Musharaf, the PPP leadership has signaled that "something can be done with Musharaf as well."

Still the government is committed to the same economic policies as General Musharaf. It praises the market economy and privatization, even appointing a privatization minister. Mr. Naveed Qamar, who was a minister of privatization during 1994-96, will take the job once more, this time claiming privatization will be carried out in a transparent process.

The PPP leadership is trying its best to save the life of a dying and isolated military dictatorship. But this is being done against the wishes of all who voted in the February elections. While the PPP leadership seems intent to organize a safe transition for the military generals and officers and the managers of economy who have played with the lives of millions, the people went to the polls with the slogan "GO Musharaf GO."

And Musharaf will go. The lawyers' movement is still strong and the restoration of the judges is the most popular demand. Meanwhile the PPP leadership is creating confusion and disillusionment even among their own ranks. One clear example is in Sind province where the government is composed of the PPP leadership and the MQM, a major party that went hand-in-hand with Musharaf for all eight years. The MQM was responsible for the murder of over 100 PPP and ANP workers on 12 May 2007, when they gave the order to open fire on those welcoming the chief justice. This MQM-PPP alliance will weaken the PPP.

Another central issue is the PPP government's efforts to implement a neoliberal agenda and go along with American Imperialism and its goals in the region. The reality is that PPP is a feudal-dominated capitalist party that creates an illusion among the masses from time to time that it is a populist party. In the face of reality, illusions do not live long.

It is high time to build a party of the working class with a politics of working class. It is time to oppose those willing to go along with the agenda of American imperialism. It is time to unite the forces of the Left and organize the peasants and workers on a class basis. It is time to put on trial those whose corruption and desire for power have ruined the lives of the majority. It is time to stand for justice. ENDS

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