

Pakistan after the General Elections

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There is a new government in Pakistan. Led by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), it has the support of the majority of the parliament of 342 members. This was the magnificent anti-dictatorship results of the general elections held on 18 February 2008. There was a massive anti-Musharaf vote. General Musharaf has been in power since 1999.

There were two political camps prior to the general elections. One that advocated to boycott the elections under General Musharaf dictatorial rule, the second, including major political parties, opted to contest the elections in any case. The boycott campaign exerted a real pressure on the regime and it could not go for the planned rigging, and over 70 percent voted for those parties opposing General Musharaf.

Before the announcement of the general elections, 60 top judges were put under house arrest on 3 November 2007 when martial law was imposed in the name of emergency; among them, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Iftikhar Ahmed Choudry. All public meetings and election rallies were banned for a month on the name of "security."

Earlier on 27 December 2007, the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the leader of the PPP, at a public rally sparked an unprecedented reaction by the masses against the military regime. It was seen that Musharaf was directly responsible for the murder as he was unable to provide Benazir Bhutto with adequate security.

This event followed a massive economic crisis and a collapse of the industrial and social infrastructure. There was a massive energy crisis. Electricity was released on a load-shedding basis, with electricity available for 10 to 12 hours a day in most parts of the country. The countryside was worst hit by this shortage. There was no commercial gas available to industries for two weeks, thus closing down hundreds of factories. Thousands of workers were laid off from the factories; they were asked to wait until electricity and gas were fully restored.

The Pakistan Muslim League Q (PMLQ), a Musharaf favorite which has been sharing power with General Musharaf since 2002, was in absolute crisis after the shortages of food items, electricity and gas. The PMLQ candidates were the target of anti-Musharaf consciousness. The general perception was that if you are against Musharaf; do not vote for the PMLQ. Following Benazir Bhutto's assassination, the wave of sympathy has opposed the PMLQ.

The PPP got nearly 36 percent of the votes while the government-supported PMLQ got nearly 23 percent and 19 percent for the PMLN. The religious fundamentalists were the real losers. They came down from 15 percent, their votes in the 2002 general elections, to 4 percent in 2008. This was due to the split among the religious parties. One major party boycotted the elections.

The religious fundamentalist alliance MMA split on the question of the boycott. The percentage of votes came down. There were already many problems within the parties of the MMA. However, the turning point of the split came when the question of participation or no participation in the elections was posed.

If the MMA had contested the elections jointly, it would not have got the same bad results that it had now. The boycott strategy contributed to the MMA split and to a disunited election strategy by the religious fundamentalist forces.

The second positive result of the boycott strategy was that the anti-Musharaf vote was not split apart from the two main parties (PPP and PMLN). Already, the PMLQ has won some seats because the PPP and the PMLN contested each other and got very high votes but not sufficient enough to win the seat. Labour Party Pakistan and other Left parties boycotted the general elections and became part of the All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM).

The defeat of pro-Musharaf parties has a lot of parallel with the historic defeat of the Bartiya Junta Party (BJP) during the 2004 Indian general elections. The so-called "India shining" sloganeering was repeated by PMLQ during this election campaign through massive advertisements in the electronic and print media. "Development" at the cost of the suffering of human beings will never pay back in political terms is a lesson of this humiliated defeat of PMLQ.

The PMLN landslide in Punjab was due to Nawaz Sharif's (the former prime minister who was deposed by general Musharaf on October 1999) clear stand on the restoration of the judiciary, lowering of prices and no compromises with Musharaf dictatorship. The demand of restoration of top judges was very popular in Punjab particularly where the advocate movement has been more vocal.

Unfortunately, the Pakistan Peoples Party of assassinated Benazir Bhutto hesitated on the question and ultimately decided not to support the demand of restoration of judges. It paid the price in Punjab where, despite the entire sympathy wave, the PPP was unable to capitalize fully the anti-Musharaf vote.

The general elections in Pakistan are normally a race of money among the candidates, like a business competition —not a democracy that is to be restored by the election, but a mockery of democracy. The general elections have given the masses a chance to choose among the exploiters. The condition that a candidate must be at least a

university graduate means that less than one percent of the whole population had a chance to become candidates.

It is true that there was a massive anti-military dictatorship vote but the sharp reality is that all those contesting the elections were from the rich and feudal class. We can expect much from a parliament dominated by rich politicians and feudal lords.

General Musharaf accepted the election results and the new government has taken over. However, the decisive powers rest with the president, that is, General Musharaf, who can dismiss the parliament any time without explaining the reasons. The main demand at present is the restoration of the deposed top judges and the resignation of General Musharaf.

Unfortunately, no one in the newly elected parliament is talking directly about General Pervez Musharaf. After Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani of the Pakistan Peoples Party took the oath of office, administered by Musharaf on 25 March, he spoke about "the need for cooperation of the president." But General Musharaf has no right to be president of Pakistan. He is a dictator and must go.

Yousaf Raza Gilani ordered the release of the judges in his first speech. How could he not? The PPP failed to win a number of seats because they did not demand their reinstatement. The reality is that no one can stop their reinstatement. Thanks to the strengthening of the Pakistan lawyers' movement, not even General Musharaf's imposition of the emergency decree on 3 November 2007 stopped the demand.

Yet in his first speech, Prime Minister Gilani did not say a single word about General Musharaf. He did please the Bhutto family by demanding a probe of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's judicial murder. In 1979, Bhutto was hanged by the orders of the Lahore High Court, with the decision subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court. Yet in his speech Mr. Gilani only demanded that parliament apologize to the nation. Why parliament? Why not the generals and the judges who conspired to hang Bhutto?

Another unfortunate fact is that the PPP leadership is seeking collaboration from General Musharaf's allies, the MQM. This party is based on linguistic trends and has mass basis in Karachi and other cities in Sind Province. The PPP leadership wants to establish a government of reconciliation, which will be a government of the rich by the rich and for the rich, but in the name of the poor.

The PPP has no program that could solve any of the basic problems ordinary people have. The party's head, Asif Ali Zardari, husband of Benazir Bhutto, was sure to reiterate in his recent interview with an American news channel that he wants to move ahead with privatization.

Also eager to demonstrate the PPP's willingness to continue neoliberal policies, the leadership welcomed the visit of U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte and Assistant Secretary of State Richard

Boucher to Pakistan. They want to show that they are good partners with U.S.imperialism in the so-called "war on terror." They are saying, "The plan will work. We are going as we planned, but unfortunately not with Benazir."

The present change of faces has come about because of the incredible sacrifices of the lawyers and many more political and social activists. These activists did not put their careers first but carried out their campaign for an independent judiciary. They boycotted the election for a principled reason.

Those who allow Musharaf to remain in the presidency are not respecting the wishes of the Pakistani people. He is a dictator who has used every dirty tactic to maintain his power. He is not a democratically elected president. The majority feel the so-called president has got to go.

Despite all that, it seems that Musharaf is on his last leg. He has become the most detested and despicable president in the history of Pakistan. No longer are there progressives, liberals or moderates in his camp. His enlightened moderation has been buried with the passage of time.

Musharaf is unloved even by most religious extremists. His previous policies gave them space into which they have moved aggressively. But Washington demanded that he suppress them in order to prove his usefulness to U.S. imperialism and he did so. Finally, neither did he please Washington nor the extremists.

The masses have spoken. Now the leaders of the PPP and the PMLN have to act accordingly. They must demand an immediate resignation of Musharaf.

They must take up the restoration question of judges immediately. They must not share power with Musharaf.

They must change the economic priorities of the Musharaf era, the implementation of neo liberal agenda. The masses have suffered a lot because of these policies. There has been an unprecedented price hike because of the so-called free market policies. Musharaf has acted upon every advice of IMF and World Bank. His tall claim of economic growth stands absolutely exposed. It is time to do away from the imperialist economic priorities and also with its political agenda.

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