



PAKISTAN: Opposition parties are poised to win poll

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EVENT: Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari agreed today to work together after the February 18 election.

SIGNIFICANCE: They lead the two main opposition parties that are expected to capture the majority of votes in an election that will either move the country towards stabilisation or exacerbate a political crisis. The poll could also determine the fate of President Pervez Musharraf.

ANALYSIS: Around 81 million Pakistanis are registered to vote in general elections due on February 18. More than 7,300 candidates are contesting:

- 272 National Assembly seats;
- 99 seats in the North-west Frontier Province (NWFP) assembly;
- 130 seats in Sindh;
- 51 seats in Baluchistan; and
- 297 seats in Punjab.

There are also seats reserved for women and minorities that are allocated proportionately (70 in the National Assembly, 38 in Sindh, 25 in NWFP, 14 in Baluchistan and 74 in Punjab). Around 1,000 international observers (mostly from the United States and the EU) will be allowed to monitor polling, vote-counting and the compilation of results. However, for security reasons, they have to let the government know which of the 64,000 polling stations they will visit.

Turnout patterns. Since the 1970 elections (viewed as Pakistan's most free), voter turnout has been steadily declining:

- It fell from 63% in 1970 to around 41% in 2002.
- In 1997, when former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif secured a landslide victory, it was 35%.

Average turnout is around 40% and it would be significant if this figure were achieved next week given the poor security situation (see [PAKISTAN: Islamabad faces homegrown Taliban threat - February 6, 2008](#)). (Over the past few days there have been three terrorist attacks on the Awami National Party, ANP, a secular Pashtun party expected to do well in NWFP). Many voters are likely to stay away:

- The government has issued shoot-on-sight orders against troublemakers.
- There is a high probability of manipulation.

Voter turnout, particularly in the rural areas (about 70% of the country), also depends on the ability of voters to get to ballot stations. On a recent survey, 75% of voters said that they may use transport provided by a candidate, though 78% also asserted that this would not influence their vote. A high turnout would benefit opposition leaders Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari, who has been leading the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) since his wife, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, was assassinated.

Political players. Political parties poised to play a crucial role in forming the next government include the PPP, Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) (PML-Q), Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and the ANP. Jamaat-e-Islam (JI) and Imran Khan's Tehrik-e-Insaf are boycotting the elections.

Only the PPP and the PML (N) have nationwide support. Indeed, the Bhutto assassination and the Election Commission decision to reject Sharif's candidature mean the next premier will not be a politician with national support. In a country where charisma and political background mean a lot, this could also discourage voting. Zardari is not contesting the elections. His controversial past is a distraction, and he has less support than PPP Vice-Chairman Makhdoom Amin Fahim.

Independent candidates are also running:

- Most belong to well-known feudal families who can win in certain constituencies.
- Many deserted the PML (Q) as its credibility fell.

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- They are among those most likely to be influenced by the intelligence agencies.

Leadership question. In the event of a PPP victory, a Sindh politician will probably be nominated for prime minister. However, there is speculation that a South Punjabi, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, is also being considered. Qureshi, a well-educated member of a respected Multan family, is deemed loyal to Zardari and acceptable to the military.

PML (Q) leader Pervez Elahi Chaudhry, former Punjab chief minister and a Musharraf ally, is also a prime ministerial candidate. However, it is highly unlikely that free and fair elections would produce a victory for the incumbent ruling party.

Rigging risk. There are considerable concerns about the electoral process:

- The chief election commissioner is known to be supportive of Musharraf.
- Political parties and human rights organisations have concerns about control of the electoral machinery.

However, efforts have been made to address allegations about 'ghost' polling stations and problems with the electoral register.

Army role. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the chief of staff, has indicated that the army will not be involved in the election process beyond law and order duties (see [PAKISTAN: New army chief will focus on morale, image - November 28, 2007](#)). He has also emphasised the need for free and fair elections and distanced himself from the election process, indirectly putting it on record that the military should not be held responsible for malpractice or rigging.

Politicians say that Military Intelligence (MI) -- which works directly under the army chief -- is playing no role in election manipulation (in contrast to the 2002 elections). However, Kayani does not have authority over the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI -- its leader, although a serving army officer, is answerable to the prime minister) (see [PAKISTAN: Military status is assured -- unlike morale - October 25, 2007](#)). The serving ISI chief, a former military secretary to Musharraf, takes his orders directly from the president (see [PAKISTAN: ISI plays ambiguous role - November 7, 2006](#)).

Projections. Indications from the Musharraf camp that the elections will produce a hung parliament are not backed up by opinion polls:

- The PPP is likely to win at least 35% of the national vote. It will also win in Sindh, and perform well in NWFP and Punjab.
- The PML (N) should secure around 25% of the national vote (with a particularly strong showing in Punjab).
- Around 12-15% of votes will go to the PML (Q), securing it around 30 national and Punjab seats. It will do well in Baluchistan.
- The Islamist MMA may win 5-7% of votes, though a split has undermined its standing nationally and in NWFP.
- The MQM has support from around 45% of votes in its Sindh stronghold, although its reputation was damaged by association with violence in Karachi last year (see [PAKISTAN: Karachi unrest weakens Musharraf's hand - May 14, 2007](#)).

Outlook. Although the presence of monitors and the neutrality of the army has reduced the likelihood of massive rigging, some manipulation of the election results is possible. Obvious rigging would probably spark protests, and any dramatic eruption of violence could lead to Kayani removing Musharraf and/or nullifying the elections. Even if the poll is deemed to be largely fair, Musharraf's standing within Pakistan will not be improved (see [US/PAKISTAN: Long-term policy requires major rethink - January 3, 2008](#)).

Opposition parties will secure votes for the stance they have adopted against Musharraf, who has been the focus of campaigning rather than policies. The PPP and the PML (N) will work together after the election and might form a grand coalition government. However, inter-party relations remain difficult: for example, Sharif takes a tougher line on restoring the judiciary that Musharraf removed last year (see [PAKISTAN: Musharraf bid for survival may prove costly - November 5, 2007](#)). Moreover, their ability to remove Musharraf from power will be limited because his supporters are likely to retain a significant presence in the assembly and a majority in the Senate.

CONCLUSION: While there is a considerable risk that the elections will be rigged and that poor security will deter voting, pro-Musharraf parties will be swept from power. The PPP is expected to secure the most votes, raising the prospect of grand coalition of parties united in opposition to the president. Stable government will depend on their ability to work together, as well as with Musharraf, for as long as he remains in power. Any obvious sign that the polls have been rigged can be expected to generate protests.

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