

Pakistan: General Elections 2008

1. Background Details:

General elections were held in Pakistan on February 18, 2008 in an atmosphere loaded with apprehension, fear of violence and uncertainty; apprehension centered around possible rigging of the electoral process and the ongoing spate of violence fuelled fear of more bloodshed and uncertainty. At the same time, aspiration and hopes to vote out a military-sponsored government after a five-year term also accompanied the process.

The PML-Q the ruling party (2002-07) ran its campaign on its achievements in national economy, betterment of education facilities, development of infrastructure and the democratic continuity that it provided during the period. Opposition parties based their campaign against the ruling coalition on the issues of shortage of wheat flour, electricity, deteriorating law and order situation, mishandling of political issues of Balochistan and the insurgency in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan called FATA.

Almost all opposition parties unified also on the issue of the restoration of those superior court judges who had been sent home for refusing to accept the Nov 3 state of emergency that President Pervez Musharraf had declared in an attempt to sweep aside legal opposition to his reelection on Oct 6.

Both sides fiercely contested the election on February 18, with sporadic violence in which reportedly 15 people lost their lives. Fears of suicide bombings – at least eight in the first seven weeks of 2008 – initially held people away from polling stations but the voter turnout greatly improved in the latter part of the day and, according the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) it swelled to nearly 47%, the highest ever recorded in the electoral history of Pakistan.

Nearly 25,000 domestic and 500 international election observers, accredited to the ECP, visited various polling stations all across the country at any time of their choice. Their capacity however was limited because they could observe only a fraction of roughly 64,500 polling stations set up across the. Monitors' presence, nevertheless, did serve as a deterrent and scaled down the chances of rigging. Another welcome sign was the decision of the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Ashfaq Kayani to keep the Pakistan Army away from the election process.

Kayani received appreciation from all and sundry for this decision and in return, the nation joined hands to deliver primarily an anti-Musharraf vote. It also agreed the election day process i.e. polling and eventual counting was free, fair, and transparent.

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With a few individual complaints of rigging, the observers also termed the process hugely free and fair. All concerned with these elections have appreciated and supported these elections.

2. Situational Analysis:

As expected, the polling produced a hung parliament; none of the mainstream political parties i.e., PML-Q, PML-N or PPP, of the slain ex-premier Benazir Bhutto, secured a clear majority to form the government. On the other hand, the religio-political alliance of MMA has “miserably lost its strength in the parliament showing that their previous victory was either supported by the intelligence services or was merely a product of certain geo-political realities.”

And to the surprise and shock of many, Maj-Gen Ehtesham Zamir, ex head of the mighty Inter Services’ Intelligence – ISI’s political cell in 2002, delivered a “blow below the belt” President Musharraf when he blamed the president for ordering manipulation before and after the 2002 elections.

In an interview with daily The News on February 24, Zamir admitted he manipulated “the last elections at the behest of President Musharraf.” The defeat of pro Musharraf PML-Q – also know as the King’s party – in the recent election, Zamir said, is “a reaction of the unnatural dispensation (installed in 2002).”

After the emergence of a hung national parliament (see chart), three political players have emerged on the scene, Pervez Musharraf, former ruling party PML-Q and all the other opposition parties. So far, the PML-N of former premier Nawaz Sharif and the PPP have demonstrated mature approach, vowing to cooperate in the new parliament and not to undermine each other in the game of power.

Party	National Assembly	Punjab Assembly	Sindh Assembly	Balochistan Assembly	NWFP Assembly
PPPP	87	79	70	7	17
PML(N)	67	104	0	0	5
PML(Q)	39	66	10	18	5
MQM	19	0	38	0	0
ANP	9	0	2	2	31
MMA	6	2	0	7	10
PML F	4	3	7	0	0
BNP(A)	1	0	0	5	0
PPP(S)	1	0	0	0	5

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NPP	2	0	3	0	0
INDEPENDENT	27	35	0	12	19
TOTAL RESULTS	262	289	130	51	92
TOTAL SEATS CONTESTED	268	293	130	51	96

“We accept their right to govern Pakistan for five years and will not create any problems for them,” Mian Nawaz Sharif, nominated parliamentary leader of PML-N said (though he has yet to contest election to become member of the legislature.) .The PPP at the same time has accepted the numerical majority of the PML-N in the biggest and politically most influential province of Pakistan, Punjab. The co-chairperson of the PPP Asif Ali Zardari in return has also promised accommodation and cooperation.

Mr. Zardari has also announced to “form a government of national consensus and unity,” yet these vows have also triggered apprehensions in the presidency. Both major parties say they are committed to work for the reinstatement of retired judges but Musharraf, who still holds the power to dissolve the assembly under the constitution “as and when he deems fit”, has repeatedly ruled out the restoration of the judges. While the election results have yet again revived hopes for the return to full civilian rule, issues such as judiciary and the judges’ restoration, is likely to create frictions between the President and the new government, and thereby trigger a new phase of instability.

PML-N’s election promise was to restore the judiciary and handle the crises of wheat flour, electricity and law and order while the PPP spoke about the supremacy of the parliament and making available to the people the unhindered supply of the daily sensitive commodities to the people of Pakistan. Promises were made while the reality is that any new government would have to face the challenge of dire energy shortfall, price hike of the common commodities, sharply increasing inflation, reduced buy power, handling the increase in the petroleum prices and with these challenges facing the government, the deliverability and the performance against their promises “would become extremely difficult as the previous government mishandled these issues,” a political aide to the PPP’s co-chair said.

That is why, as major political parties continue consultations for government formations at the centre and in the four provinces, fears of political instability are also overshadowing these attempts because no party-combination seems to be favorably inclined to President Musharraf, who now holds majority of the executive authority that the constitution originally bestowed on the Prime Minister.

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People of Pakistan are also watching with unease the growing role of the West in the Pakistani politics. Frantic meetings of US and British diplomats with Zardari and Sharif ahead of government formation are being interpreted as attempts to protect President Musharraf from a political eviction from the presidency. The common dislike for President Musharraf makes it very hard for any political coalition to sell him as a “partner in power.”

Washington and London, the mainstay of Musharraf’s rule, still seem obsessed with his “indispensability” and hence have reportedly been trying to convince Zardari and Sharif to co-exist with him. But their desires probably don’t correspond to the ground realities any more. Whether and how Musharraf exits the scene it will become clear in the coming weeks.

3. Recommendations of CRSS:

Given the importance of a political stability in Pakistan, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. The transition to civilian rule should occur immediately under the provisions of the constitution of Pakistan.
2. The Executive must respect the popular mandate of the political leadership of the political parties in Pakistan which the people of the country have given them.
3. The Western powers should choose to work with and support the political will and aspirations of the people of Pakistan and must prioritize the institutions to persons.
4. All the political parties must demonstrate political wisdom to steer Pakistan to the civilian rule and democracy without confrontation that would lead Pakistan into greater instability and chaos.
5. The President of Pakistan must respect the mandate of the political parties and the newly elected national assembly and should not be a party with any political force, as it was seen in the past.
6. All the political forces should join forces to provide much needed relief to the Pakistani people so that voters’ political and social aspirations are addressed increasing their confidence both in their vote the democratic processes.
7. All the involved parties, domestic and foreign, should work together for a smooth and quick transition.