

# **Center for Research and Security Studies**

## **February 18, 2008 Elections and Pakistan's Political Future**

### **1. Background Details:**

Originally scheduled for January 8, 2008 but delayed because of the assassination of former Prime Minister (PM), Benazir Bhutto, the February 18, 2008 elections have become one of the most watched and observed international political event. All of the major news channels of the world have their cameras and anchors fixed in Pakistan and are closely watching every singly hour with great interest. Elections take place all across the world but hardly stir such an interest the way the Pakistani elections have. There are many reasons but one most important is Pakistan's frontline role in war against terror that President Musharraf is leading for Pakistan. Many observers in Pakistan opine that President Musharraf is the most controversial of all the Presidents of Pakistan and has tried extremely hard to remain in power. He openly patronized Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) both as the President and Chief of Army Staff and did not hid his loath and comments against the former PM Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif whose parties formed the main opposition to PML-Q. It is widely believed that at the behest of Musharraf, Pakistan's intelligence community coerced or bribed nearly 25 members of national assembly who were originally elected from Pakistan People's Party (PPP) ticket to breakaway to create a new faction to assist PML-Q meeting the numbers to form a government in 2002.

Later on in 2007, despite the clear order by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Musharraf barred Mian Nawaz Sharif, former PM and the chief of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to enter Pakistan in the month of September. Through his role as the Chief of Army Staff since the coup in October 1999 and then as the President of Pakistan from 2002, Musharraf has been seen as the patron-in-chief of PML-Q. His partisan relationship with the PML-Q put a huge question mark on his role as the head of the state, neutrality during elections and the level of freedom and fairness of the elections. It is worth noting that almost all the opposition political parties have already expressed their doubts on the credibility of elections.

### **2. Situational Analysis:**

The political mood in Pakistan is simmering though at a low flame but the temperature is extremely high. All the major opposition parties firmly believe that Musharraf's policies have pushed Pakistan into a chaos where the country has lost its international standing – as an allegedly loose state with strong terrorist bases – as well as the domestic peace with alarmingly increased suicide bombing during the last half of 2007. Political analysts and intelligentsia via various media interjections and interactions have suggested that these elections can make or break the shape of Pakistan's political future and this would all depend on the degree of the fairness with which these elections will be held. With militants' mounting pressure from the northern Pakistan, political temperatures high in the Sindh province, ongoing militant conflict in Balochistan and an impasse on peace talks with India, Pakistan finds itself in the eye of the storm both domestically and regionally. Civil society activists have been raising their voices and showing concerns that if the elections would be rigged, both the domestic and international problems for Pakistan will rise and Pakistan being in the lead on the global war on terror must not be stumbling block in this very important region. They see a tremendous opportunity both for the

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country and the nation in the February 8 elections that will decide the making of the parliament. “If free and fair, these elections will determine not only the course of the nation but also the region with political resolve and solutions taking lead on one person’s whims to take decision in solitude with no interaction with the national political process[1],” a civil society activist said in a speech. And we have seen that Musharraf as an individual has undermined both the political process and the political wisdom of the nation by taking personal decisions, it was added.

There are conflicting reports about the number of seats that various political parties will win via the election process and the numbers vary from all major media sources. The political sentiment of the people in major urban centers is that PPP might score a landslide victory winning over a hundred seats alone with PML-N as the runner up “but that is an overstatement of the political fact as the ones who make such claims are unaware of the political culture and mosaic of Pakistan and especially of Punjab[2],” a political analyst said. Punjab has 148 seats in a house of 272 and elections on two constituencies have been postponed on NA 207 (Benazir Bhutto in Sindh) and NA 119 (demise of Tariq Banday in Punjab). Nearly 64.8%[3] of Punjab comprises of rural or small town centers where politics and the political structure is based on primitive practices of personal followings. Both the mainstream political opposition parties i.e. PPP and PML-N are expected to score well in the urban centers while PML-Q with a very strong set of candidates from traditional families is expected score better in the rural and town centers.

Odds of an increased political polarization are high if political dissent and disagreement is handled via coercion as people of Pakistan will be exercising their right to vote in a very volatile environment. The Government of Pakistan has taken many right steps to ensure the credibility of the elections by welcoming foreign observers’ missions to monitor the electoral process in Pakistan. EU, US, Canada, Britain, many international NGOs and local civil society organizations are closely watching the process of the elections. Many world leaders have urged Pakistani government to demonstrate quality of conduct and impartiality to hold these elections. It is expected that with such a heavy presence of foreign observers in Pakistan, the chances of political or administrative rigging of the electoral process could be minimized.

Via these elections, the Pakistani nation is looking forward to gaining more political stability and a smooth transition of the political process. Only a free and fair election will help restoring the voters confidence in the system and the state. Only these elections will provide Pakistan the much needed internal stability that would further cement this nation’s cooperation in the global war on terror that the world just cannot afford to lose.

### **3. Recommendations of CRSS:**

With the importance of these elections, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. The government must provide complete support to all the international and domestic election observers’ missions and must grant them full access to any part of the country and the elections’ process.
2. Government must stay neutral and must exhibit its neutrality during the election process.

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3. The government must provide strict security during the polling process and that none of the opposition candidates should be coerced.
4. The Election Commission of Pakistan should demonstrate a strong operational and administrative control on the election process with paying quick and complete attention to any complaints of misconduct.
5. The President of Pakistan must ensure his neutrality in the post-election scenario and the political parties must be allowed to enter any kind of political set up via the elected parliament. This process must not be hindered.

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[1] Lawyers convention in Rawalpindi. February 2, 2008.

[2] An Urdu media report. February 11, 2008.

[3] Population study of South Asia. 2007.