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Viewpoints are a moderated dialogue between experts expressing opposing or differing opinions on a topic of contemporary relevance

In the Shadow of Benazir

As Pakistan approaches its once-postponed national elections on February 18th, most observers are focused on the prospects for the government and opposition parties and whether the election contests will be free and fair. The fallout from the assassination of Benazir Bhutto continues to shape the political discourse as do the tensions from mounting popular economic grievances. There is uncertainty whether the elections will bring normalization to Pakistan's volatile political scene or usher in a period of instability. There are fears that the results will be contested, leading to street violence and possibly another imposition of emergency rule.

Yet at the same time there is a widely shared belief among observers that the country is in a transitional phase, moving away from authoritarianism toward greater democracy. Many are hoping that a stable civilian government can provide the national consensus that may be needed to confront the religiously motivated extremists who are increasingly challenging the ideology and authority of the Pakistani state. In the following two essays, two of Pakistan's most astute political analysts, H. Askari Rizvi and Syed Farooq Hasnat, have been asked by the Middle East Institute to present their views on these and related topics. Both offer a troubling picture, indicating the uncertainty that surrounds the elections and the likelihood that Pakistan may be facing a period of continuing political turmoil.



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Pakistan has had so few national elections in its 60-year history that every exercise to elect the national Parliament is exceptional. These relatively rare events are not only a mechanism for effecting a change of government but are also a means for putting the political process back on the rails and redefining the provisions of the 1973 constitution, which has been shredded by four periods of martial law. General (retired) Pervez Musharraf has declared martial law twice, ironically once against his own government.



The forthcoming election in Pakistan is exceptional in its own right, as it is scheduled to take place in particularly demanding circumstances. Of these circumstances, the December 27 assassination of Benazir Bhutto is clearly the most dramatic and arguably the most revealing. Following the assassination, electioneering came to an abrupt standstill and the elections themselves, originally scheduled for January 8, were postponed to February 18.

The Ministry of the Interior's controversial explanation of Ms. Bhutto's brutal murder spawned its own set of consequences, deepening the distrust of the Musharraf government. In fact, the vast majority of Pakistanis rejected the official explanation. The government's subsequent revised explanation — including President Musharraf's suggestion that it was Ms. Bhutto's own fault that she had been shot — fueled more confusion and outrage.

In a recent Gallup International poll, more than 58% of Pakistani respondents blame the government for the assassination while only 17% believe that militant groups were responsible for her removal from the political scene. Benazir's husband, Asif Zardari, has called for a United Nations inquiry modeled after the inquiry into the assassination of former Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri

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Pakistan faces a paradox. Most political observers believe that Pakistan urgently needs free, fair, and transparent elections, but none is convinced that the elections would usher in an era of participatory governance, internal harmony, and stability in the country.



These fears were underscored by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, leader of the main opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), on December 27, 2007 in the city of Rawalpindi, which houses the headquarters of the all-powerful Pakistan Army. This incident removed a leader from the political scene who enjoyed widespread popular appeal and represented liberal politics and a moderate socio-cultural disposition. This was a major setback for the resurgence of liberal and moderate politics in Pakistan that challenged Islamic extremism as well as the authoritarian governance by President Pervez Musharraf.

Bhutto supporters were outraged by the government's conflicting claims of how Bhutto was killed — claims ostensibly aimed to dispel the impression that the government, especially the intelligence agencies, was involved directly or indirectly in the assassination.

The assassination has three major implications for the elections and the subsequent situation. First, it adds a new set of grievances to the already existing internal tensions caused by religious extremism and violence, the troubled law and order situation, inflation and price increases for essential food items, and socio-economic inequities. Many political activists view the assassination as a bid by the Musharraf-led Pakistani establishment — under pressure since the removal of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Iftikhar Chaudhry on March 17 — to remove the latest challenge to its dominant role.



Hasnat...

— an idea the Musharraf government opposes.

The handling of Benazir's murder will have a huge impact on the national elections. It is expected that there will be a large sympathy vote for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and that the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q), a protégé of Musharraf, will suffer a severe setback. Benazir's removal has strengthened the suspicion that the Q League, supported by Musharraf and his interim government, will manipulate the elections to their benefit.

Neither the fears of Musharraf and his supporters nor the suspicions that they might rig the elections are misplaced. During her last days, Benazir Bhutto (along with Nawaz Sharif) had generated a healthy political process and had electrified the people, much to the chagrin of the establishment. It had seemed that Pakistan was on track to re-establish its institutions and to revive the constitution in its original shape. Musharraf admitted in a CBS television interview that he was shocked — and no doubt unnerved — when Ms. Bhutto returned to Pakistan to contest the elections. In fact, the establishment had wanted to keep Benazir and Nawaz out of Pakistan so that they could entrench the “King's Party” in the Parliament with a comfortable margin, ideally securing a two-thirds majority that would preserve Musharraf's hold on power and policy prerogatives.

Fearing that his handpicked party would not be able to obtain a two-thirds or even a simple majority in the parliament, Musharraf panicked and took a number of steps to solidify his position. These steps included the imposition of martial law, the dismissal from service of Supreme Court justices who objected to his extra-constitutional decrees and their placement under house arrest (along with their families), the gagging of the media, a brutal crackdown on civil society, the abrogation of legal provisions standing in the way of his becoming President while simultaneously holding the position of the Army Chief of Staff, and hurriedly packing the Supreme Court with individuals who condone these acts. By the time Musharraf lifted martial law and removed his army uniform, he had acquired all the necessary powers to manipulate the elections and to impose himself as President for another five years.

Rizvi...

Second, since the assassination there has been a noticeable shift in support from the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q) to the PPP and Nawaz Sharif faction of the PML, called the PML-N. Though it is difficult to gauge the full implication of the sympathy factor, the government has taken steps to neutralize this trend.

Third, Pervez Musharraf has become more controversial than ever. The opposition political parties and most societal groups view him as the major obstacle to their efforts to work towards the promotion of democracy and internal harmony. Some of them have called for his resignation.

Pervez Musharraf has expressed his determination to hold on to power because, like all Pakistani military rulers, he views himself as the guarantor of Pakistan's stability and as a bulwark against Islamic extremism and terrorism. This view is hardly shared by the non-official political circles, who view him as part of Pakistan's problems.

Pervez Musharraf has repeatedly promised to hold free, fair, transparent, and peaceful elections. However, empirical evidence suggests that the electoral process is flawed in many respects. The PPP released a dossier on election malpractices prepared under the instruction of its slain leader. The PML-N has also issued detailed data on pre-poll manipulation in favor of the pro-Musharraf PML-Q. These complaints include the partisan role of Musharraf and the caretaker federal and provincial governments, political manipulation through district nazims in the local government system who control district-level administration, and the use of the bureaucratic machinery, official transport, and other resources to the advantage of the pro-Musharraf PML-Q. There are complaints about the role of the intelligence agencies, especially the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), an army-dominated agency, and the Intelligence Bureau (IB), a civilian outfit headed by a retired brigadier known for his close links with Musharraf.

Some independent Pakistani organizations also have talked of procedural and operational flaws. The latest comments by the Citizens Group on Electoral Process (CGEP), the Pakistan Institute for Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan clearly show that they find the pre-election pro-



Hasnat...

It was widely believed that the Q League was on the verge of being routed when the Bhutto assassination took place. Leaders of the Q League were no longer even addressing public meetings and were confined to a few places in Punjab. In contrast, Benazir, who was a national figure and a representative of all the provinces of Pakistan, had managed to achieve a reasonable understanding with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N). It was expected that both the major parties would form a coalition government after the elections. Clearly, Musharraf had other ideas.

On the eve of the Bhutto assassination, the US-brokered “deal” between Musharraf and Benazir lay in tatters, as trust between these two contrary personalities had drained away. In this respect, the Bush Administration had totally misread the dynamics of Pakistani politics. Nor, apparently, did the administration understand that Benazir derived her support from the people, who in turn disliked, and even hated, Musharraf for his dictatorial rule. By pushing Ms. Bhutto to become the civilian face of a military dictator, the Bush Administration exposed her to various risks in Pakistan. And as subsequent events have proved, Washington has little or no leverage, either with the military dictator or on the domestic dynamics of Pakistan.

The national elections of 2008 are bound to be highly controversial. On a number of occasions just before her assassination, Benazir had stated that although she had strong evidence the elections would be rigged, she would participate in them so as not to leave the field open for the government party. All the political parties, with the exception of those few who support Musharraf, have expressed their apprehension about the impartiality of the elections. They further believe that free elections cannot be held while Musharraf is at the helm.

Nonetheless, the circumstances surrounding the elections, if not the elections themselves, are illuminating. They reveal that the conflict in Pakistan today, contrary to many accounts in the Western press, is not between the “liberal” and the “orthodox” segments of society, but between the democrats and the dictatorial establishment. And, as a symbol of democracy and freedom, Benazir Bhutto will cast a huge shadow over the elections of 2008, no matter

Rizvi...

cesses to be deficient in many respects. Almost all groups and parties have strong reservations about the impartiality of the Election Commission that appears helpless in checking the excesses of the pro-Musharraf political leaders. Musharraf has repeatedly dismissed these claims.

Much depends on what happens on and around the polling day. If a perception develops on that day that the election has been stolen by the official circles, the opposition parties and the societal groups are expected to challenge this in the streets. In the event that the major opposition parties, the PPP and the PML-N, emerge as the leading parties, they will mobilize support from the smaller parties and independents to form the government, clip the powers of Musharraf and, if possible, remove him through impeachment.

Musharraf is working on an alternate strategy to consolidate his hold. This is likely to involve the manipulation of the elected members through the intelligence agencies and by material incentives. He will endeavor to put together a coalition around his main loyalists, i.e. the PML and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). They are expected to be joined by the pro-Taliban Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam led by Fazlur Rahman (JUI-F), some independents, and others by splitting the opposition.

The bottom line is that Pakistan will pass through a difficult and uncertain time while setting up a new government. In the event that the opposition performs better, the making of the opposition government and its smooth functioning will be problematic. This will limit Musharraf’s options to protect his controversial re-election for the second term and his commanding role in governance, but he is not expected to give in to the opposition quietly.

The post-election administration will be faced with the troubled legacies of the pre-election government regarding Islamic extremism and terrorism, the tenuous law and order situation, steep price hikes and shortages of food commodities, and fast-growing socio-economic disparities which have accentuated regional polarization.

Of late, the Musharraf government has escalated the level of military operations against hardline Islamic groups in



The Middle East Institute

Viewpoints

Hasnat...

how effectively they are rigged.

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Rizvi...

the tribal areas and Swat, ostensibly to show its determination to the international community to root out extremism and terrorism. But the fact of the matter is that the Musharraf government's ambiguous approach towards Islamic militancy has enabled these elements to entrench themselves in these areas and expand their strong influence in several adjoining districts of the Frontier province. They enforce strict Islamic codes in these areas by the threat of violence. They also have been successful in launching suicide attacks and bombings in major cities and, if we accept the official explanation, Benazir Bhutto was killed by one such group. The growing threat of Islamic extremism and violence by these groups poses the most serious challenge to civic order in Pakistan.

Another serious challenge is the growing economic pressures on the common people against the backdrop of the official claims of impressive economic development. The official statements on the "economic boom" are meaningless for ordinary people, who, for example, have had to stand in line for hours to get one bag of wheat flour, though the government claimed in 2006-07 that Pakistan had a bumper wheat crop. The gas shortages and electric power outages add to their miseries. Temporary workers, as well as self-employed and daily wage earners have been hit extremely hard by surging prices and shortages of essential commodities.

These troubled realities on the ground create serious doubts about the prospects of stability and internal harmony in the post-election period. What Pakistan faces today is the outcome of Musharraf's highly centralized and authoritarian system of governance, the pattern of denial of the existence of problems and refusal to accept responsibility for them, and policies of seeking politically expedient solutions to hold on to power. Now, these policies have unraveled.

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