

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1819
February 18, 2008

Pakistan: Historic Election Reinforces Democracy

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Despite concerns over security and the potential for rigging, Pakistanis turned out in decent numbers for today's parliamentary elections, which early returns indicate favored the opposition Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League/Nawaz (PML/N). The election will help end a year of political instability and put Pakistan on the path toward civilian-led rule even as al-Qaeda works to destabilize the state through a campaign of suicide bombings that have killed more than 800 people in the past six months. Washington should be prepared to work with the new civilian government and recognize that President Pervez Musharraf's role in governing the country is likely to diminish as a new civilian government finds its footing.

A Rebuke to Extremists. Widespread concern over the potential for rigging overshadowed the symbolic importance of today's election—the Pakistani people demonstrating their determination to participate in a democratic process despite concerted efforts by al-Qaeda and Taliban-backed extremists to disrupt it through violence and intimidation. Some voters were deterred by Saturday's attack in the Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan that killed nearly 50 people. However, the absence of large-scale extremist violence on the day of the polling was a victory for Pakistan's security forces, which had fanned out across the country to protect voters. Around 20 people reportedly were killed in sporadic election-related violence, and voting was stopped in some polling stations after rival parties exchanged gunfire. Such incidents are typical in Pakistani elections.

Expected success by the secular Pashtun Awami National Party over the pro-Taliban Jamaat-i-Ulema-Islam (JUI), which has ruled the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) since 2002, also demonstrates Pakistani voters' opposition to recent attempts by Taliban-backed militants to spread strict Islamic edicts in some parts of the NWFP. Although the Pashtuns in the NWFP are more religiously conservative than Pakistanis living in other parts of the country, they opposed efforts to "Talibanize" society through actions such as closing down girls' schools, burning video stores, and intimidating barbers, and they blamed JUI for a failure to stop the extremists.

Fears of Rigging Allayed. Recent polling by international non-governmental institutions showed that Musharraf's popularity had plummeted in recent months, particularly after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, and that support for the Pakistan Muslim League/Qaid-e-Azam (PML/Q) had also taken a hit from its association with Musharraf and rising economic hardships. The polling further showed that the PPP commanded the most grassroots support and that a sympathy vote for the slain leader's party was likely to push its votes even higher. Still, many Pakistanis expected the Musharraf regime to rig the vote in favor of his supporters in

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1819.cfm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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the PML/Q, a move that likely would have sparked massive street protests.

If the election brings to power a PPP-led coalition that includes Nawaz Sharif's party, President Musharraf's standing could weaken considerably. PPP Co-Chairman Asif Zardari has indicated that he would pursue a unity government and has not ruled out working with Musharraf. However, major wins by Sharif's party increase his political bargaining power and the likelihood that he will press for steps, such as calling for the reinstatement of the deposed judges, that would eventually lead to the ouster of Musharraf. If the independent judges return to the bench, they will likely rule against the legitimacy of Musharraf's presidency, forcing him to resign and possibly even face charges of treason. Although it is possible that the new Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Kiyani, could try to prevail on Asif Zardari to work with Musharraf, Kiyani's inclination so far has been to distance himself from civilian politics.

U.S. Position Will Affect Overall Partnership with Pakistan. It is difficult to overstate the importance of today's election in determining the future direction of Pakistan and how it will cope with rising religious extremism in some parts of the country. Pakistan's ability to overcome the challenge from religious extremists will be a significant determinant of the ultimate outcome of the struggle against al-Qaeda-inspired global terrorism.

The U.S. image in Pakistan has been tarnished not only by a perception that Washington has relied too heavily on military operations in its war on terrorism, but also by U.S. unwillingness to criticize Musharraf for undermining civil society and the democratic process over the past year. According to

a recent poll by the U.S. International Republican Institute, 73 percent of Pakistanis believe religious extremism is a serious problem in their country, but only 9 percent believe that Pakistan should cooperate with the U.S. in the global war against terrorism.

Pakistan has undergone dramatic changes in the past year, with civil society raising its voice and Musharraf relying increasingly on repressive measures to maintain his grip on power. The anger toward Musharraf has fused with a visceral anti-American sentiment, which has lowered Pakistani support for fighting terrorists, particularly in the Tribal Areas. U.S. officials may view Musharraf as the glue that holds Pakistan together, but a growing number of Pakistanis view him as source of instability. This disconnect between U.S. policymakers and the broader Pakistani public threatens to further erode Pakistani support for ties with the U.S., especially if Washington is seen as clinging to Musharraf when his party has been largely rejected at the polls.

It is therefore critical that the U.S. is seen as taking an objective and impartial view of the elections based on its assessment of the fairness of the process as reported by election observers—from the U.S., Pakistan, Europe, and elsewhere—and a thorough survey of Pakistani public opinion. The U.S. position on these historic elections will reverberate for some time to come on the overall quality of the U.S.–Pakistan relationship. The U.S. must begin to view Musharraf as a transitional figure and be ready to deal with a more broad-based civilian government in Pakistan.

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