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The Mother of All Elections

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The Pakistani elections of last Monday were a watershed moment; not just for Pakistan but for the entire region. The question that remains is “what now?” That the Pakistani People’s Party (PPP) and the Pakistani Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N) triumphed is clear; it remains to be seen, however whether their newly formed coalition can last,¹ and more importantly, what steps it plans to pursue in dismantling the regime of Pervez Musharraf.²

What Musharraf had termed “the mother of all elections” has come to be a broadly “free and fair” election – something most analysts were not expecting.³ As early as November, serious allegations of vote-rigging began to appear; only a few days before the actual elections, audio-tape of the Attorney General discussing the future irregularities came to light.⁴ Earlier predictions that Musharraf’s PML-Q party was going to be crushed, of 342 National Assembly seats up for election they have taken have proven nearly correct.⁵ Early results showed a “crushing defeat” to PML-Q,⁶ however, election tallies have since shown his opponents will likely fall short of the majority in parliament needed to impeach President Musharraf.⁷

The PPP won most of the seats in the new Parliament with 88, PML-N, Nawaz Sharif’s party, claimed 66 seats, while Musharraf’s party, PML-Q, held on to 38 seats. Without a two-thirds majority, the PPP and PML-N will need to enter a

¹ Jane Perlez and Carlotta Gall, “Opposition coalition in Pakistan is setback for Musharraf and Washington,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 22, 2008, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/02/22/asia/pakistan.php> (February 22, 2008), and Syed Shoaib Hasan, “Can Pakistani opposition unite?” *BBC News*, February 22, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7258084.stm (February 22, 2008).

² “Pakistan – the balance of forces,” *BBC News*, February 21, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7078656.stm (February 22, 2008).

³ Margaret Warner, Interview with Steve Coll, “News Hour with Jim Lehrer,” *PBS*, February 19, 2008.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Pakistan: Attorney General Aware of ‘Massive’ Election-Rigging Plans,” February 15, 2008, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/02/14/pakist18069.htm> (February 15, 2008).

⁵ Mariam Chaudhry, “Pakistan elections: Facts and figures,” *CNN*, February 15, 2008, http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/02/15/pakistan.facts/index.html?eref=rss_latest (February 15, 2008)

⁶ Carlotta Gall and Jane Perlez, “Pakistanis Deal Severe Defeat to Musharraf in Election,” *NY Times*, February 19, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/19/world/asia/19pstan.html> (February 21, 2008).

⁷ Carlotta Gall, “Pakistan’s Victors May Lack Strength to Oust Musharraf,” *NY Times*, February 21, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/21/world/asia/21pstan.html?_r=1&oref=slogin (February 21, 2008).

coalition with the other parties in parliament in order to remove Musharraf who has dismissed calls to resign, "We have to move forward in a way that we bring about a stable democratic government in Pakistan."⁸ News of a new government certainly brings opportunity to move forward though it is not at all clear yet whether the process will remain stable. Already, Pakistani prosecutors are urging a Swiss court to prosecute PPP Co-chairman Asif Zardari for stashing 60 million Swiss francs in Swiss bank accounts⁹ – undoubtedly a move by Musharraf to upset the momentum of the PPP.

The three major opposition winners of the election, PPP, PML-N and Awami National Party (ANP – a Pashtun nationalist party with a strong following in the Northwest Frontier Province) have held consultations towards the formation of a government in Islamabad. They will look to reach a consensus over issues such as the restoration of the deposed judges, namely Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, the future of Musharraf, and the Charter for Democracy, an agreement the PPP and PML-N drew up last year pledging to undo many of the constitutional changes passed under Musharraf and previous military regimes, particularly an article that allows the president to dismiss Parliament and the government. In a recent interview, PPP Co-chairman, Asif Ali Zardari, said his party is, "comfortable with the idea of Nawaz Sharif as the next prime minister."¹⁰ However, under current laws, criminals under indictment cannot hold office in Pakistan.¹¹ Therefore, the new Prime Minister will not surprisingly be a PPP candidate. Likely contenders are Amin Fahim, a long time PPP politician who Benazir Bhutto respected and Aitzaz Ahsan, a PPP member and leader of the anti-Musharraf lawyers' movement.¹²

Undoubtedly, the biggest problem for Musharraf, and much of the old regime, is of a judicial nature. Although both the PPP and the PML-N have supported Chief Justice Chaudhry in the past, his reinstatement would almost certainly mean the bringing of charges against Musharraf. The U.S., anxious to avoid further confrontation, reportedly met with Asif Zardari at the embassy on Feb. 20 in order to confer their displeasure with any judicial rearranging.¹³ Sharif's

⁸ Wall Street Journal as quoted in: Carlotta Gall, "Pakistan's Victors May Lack Strength to Oust Musharraf," *NY Times*, February 21, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/21/world/asia/21pstan.html?_r=1&oref=slogin (February 21, 2008).

⁹ dNovus RDI, "Nightwatch," *AFCEA Intelligence*, February 21, 2008.

¹⁰ Naveed Butt, "Parliament to decide on Musharraf: Zardari," *The Nation*, February 21, 2008, <http://www.nation.com.pk/daily/feb-2008/21/index1.php> (February 21, 2008).

¹¹ dNovus RDI, "Nightwatch," *AFCEA Intelligence*, February 21, 2008.

¹² "Bhutto party meeting to pick PM," *BBC News*, February 22, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7258318.stm (February 22, 2008).

¹³ Nirupama Subramanian, "Demand to reinstate Justice Chaudhary," *The Hindu*, February 22, 2008, <http://www.hindu.com/2008/02/22/stories/2008022256391700.htm> (February 22, 2008).

hatred for Musharraf is strong, however, and his desire to rain punishment down on his former jailer may be difficult to abate.¹⁴

Questions also remain as to what the new Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, General Kayani, will do. Will he ally himself with the will of the people and the new coalition parliament? Or will he risk his own standing and defend Musharraf to the bitter end? Kayani will have a difficult time defending the past actions of Musharraf, especially if former Chief Justice Chaudhry is reinstated. No prior military administration in Pakistan had attacked the judiciary. As one analyst claims, Musharraf is “arguably the least astute in a long line of arrogant constitutional usurpers from the Pakistan Army”¹⁵; whether that line is cut or continues may depend on the new Army chief.

Possibly one of the biggest questions for the US is whether the new government will cooperate with current and future US policies – particularly in the context of the War on Terror. The new government majority will likely appear secular but may also insist upon greater levels of sovereignty in terms of military operations in FATA and around the Afghanistan / Pakistan border region where Taliban, Al Qaeda, and terrorist networks flourish. If Musharraf is exiled, the US may find itself working more with the new General than with the new Prime Minister. Despite Benazir Bhutto’s earlier promises to rid the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of militants,¹⁶ Nawaz Sharif has stood strongly against any Western or Pakistani army involvement saying “Pakistan’s army was not created to fight against Pakistanis.”¹⁷ Ultimately, the elections in Pakistan and their fallout will not only be a gauge of the strength of democracy in the region, but of the relationship between the US and a new Pakistani government.

¹⁴ “Musharraf’s rule illegal, Sharif tells protesters,” *Agency France Press*, February 21, 2008, <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5haeCPXVKxl-MAT74KJooQCh6T37Q> (February 22, 2008).

¹⁵ dNovus RDI, “Nightwatch,” *AFCEA Intelligence*, February 21, 2008.

¹⁶ Alec E. Metz, “The Assassination of Benazir Bhutto,” *Culture and Conflict Review*, Vol 2 (1), January 2008, <http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Journal/Jan08/Metz.html> (February 22, 2008).

¹⁷ “Taliban declare ceasefire in Waziristan,” *Pak Tribune*, February 7, 2008, <http://www.paktribune.com/news/index.shtml?197082> (February 22, 2008).