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Pakistan

Elections change little

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The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) headed by Nawaz Sharif won an unprecedented landslide win in the February 3rd parliamentary elections B. Skanthakumar discusses the election with London-based journalist and activist Arif Azad.

Arif Azad: In one sense the result is an extension of the old order. Nothing has changed for the majority. The huge mandate that Nawaz Sharif [leader of the Pakistan Muslim League] has received was the result of a stitch-up between President Farooq Leghari and the military to the advantage of this pro-establishment candidate. The Muslim League is now the national party of Pakistan and has expanded from its base in Punjab province. It has solid representation in Sindh, Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Province.

The Peoples Party has been reduced to its strong-hold of Sindh province - where the Bhuttos have family connections and are landowners. Even before the election, Sindhis I spoke to sensed a sea-change in attitudes of the Sindh towards Bhutto and her Party. Many of her core supporters deserted her by not voting in the elections at all. [Voter turnout was only 36.36%, down from 43% in 1993].

The Mohajir Quami Movement [party of Urdu speaking migrants from India settled in the urban centres of Sindh] has made a comeback in its fortress of Karachi in Sindh. Benazir Bhutto did the military's dirty work for them by crushing the MQM and 'order' has been restored in Karachi though political and sectarian murders continue. The MQM will form the next provincial government in Sindh with the support of the Muslim League.

There has been an interesting development in Baluchistan. The Baluchistan National Movement was formed only a month before the elections by Ataullah Mengal. He is a regional autonomist and a key figure in the past insurgency movement there, subsequently in exile in London in its aftermath. This new party has won a sizeable number of seats in that province.

In North-West Frontier Province, the Awami National Party (ANP) was runner up to the Muslim League. The ANP is no longer a regional autonomist party. [1] They know that they can only rule their province with the support of the military and in collaboration with a Punjabi party. They have ditched their commitment to social justice and are now simply a party for the Pashtun people.

Many bourgeois centrist politicians who had previously been pro-military openly criticised the role of the military in the dismissal of the Bhutto government and accused them of rigging the elections to oust them from the scene in a clean-up of politics. Even a leader of the religious party Jamiat-ullami-Islam, which is traditionally pro-military was extremely critical of them. Meanwhile Benazir Bhutto didn't have a word to say against them, mindful she needed their support to save her future political fortune and to protect her family, particularly her husband, Asif Zardari, who is under arrest on corruption and murder charges. [2]

Benazir Bhutto was associated with the struggles against Zia-UI-Haq's military regime and benefited enormously from the populist legacy of her father's administration and the "pro-poor" rhetoric of the Pakistan Peoples Party. And yet the dismissal of her government by the President on November 5th 1996 was greeted by popular indifference, even enthusiasm...

Some influential columnists and newspaper editors advocated this course of action four or five months preceding November. This strengthened the hand of the President.

Benazir Bhutto was voted out on her record in office. She really disillusioned the whole country. Her government is associated with high inflation. People are groaning under the burden of the rising cost of living. Benazir was perceived as being very arrogant. Even during her election rallies she never apologised for her mistakes and instead denounced the President for dismissing her, at every opportunity. Nawaz Sharif spoke at rallies which were far larger than his rival's. He was contrite about the record of his government while Prime Minister between 1990 and 1993. He seemed to be more in touch with the grievances of ordinary people.

There was also the Asif Ali Zardari factor. Bhutto's husband and his enrichment through corruption was her greatest liability. From Mr. Ten Percent, he became known as Mr. Thirty Percent [his commission on business deals he negotiated using his influence]. She never reined him in and in fact is completely loyal to him. When the President asked her to clamp down on Zardari's business activities, she delivered a snub to him by appointing her husband as Minister for Investment the following day! One of the scandals which contributed to her downfall is "Surreygate".

The Bhuttos are rumoured to have a 350 acre estate and mansion in Surrey, England. Then Zardari imported a stable of horses which were fed on an expensive diet while the poor are scraping by. All this swelled public anger. The press went to town on these facts. Even die-hard PPP activists were ashamed to identify themselves with the Government. During the election campaign, Benazir was low-key and conciliatory. She probably wants to strike a deal with the new government for her husband's release and was prepared to lose the election for this purpose.

Many members of the PPP believe Benazir should cut her ties with Zardari and concentrate on revitalising the party organisation and return to the populist traditions of her father in the early 1970s. While her government didn't attack the interests of the business class, bureaucracy and the military, Benazir herself said that her dismissal was the result of a conspiracy by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These institutions are using the rhetoric of "good governance" to criticise the kickbacks and rampant corruption, which reduces the profits of foreign capital. Asif Zardari was a very high profile individual and deeply implicated in all of this and Benazir Bhutto suffered by association.

What has happened to the Islamic fundamentalist parties which were so influential in Pakistani politics and seemed to define the agenda even of mainstream secular parties? The Jamaat-i-Islami boycotted the elections, though the Jamiat-Ullami-Islam did win a few seats.

Ideology has taken second place for most people to the sheer struggle for day to day living. In Pakistan people pay lip service to Islam but very few want an Islamic state. They know the record of fundamentalist movements in areas where they do have influence. Secondly, the new Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif appeals to the same layer that is most supportive of these fundamentalist parties especially the bazaar merchant and the petty bourgeoisie more generally. He has captured this vote. Interestingly the rhetoric of these movements has also changed. They are less strident in their use of Islam as ideology and now focus on social justice questions.

In fact they out-flank the Peoples Party to its left on a number of issues. It is the state of the economy which pre-occupies people. Many voted for Nawaz Sharif on the basis that as a businessman he would manage the economy well and at any rate he couldn't be any worse than his predecessor!

I am very sceptical that the economy can be turned around by the new regime but that is the popular perception. At present it appears that fundamentalist movements have lost their influence but given Pakistan's history and its *raison d'être* as a state created for Muslims, these parties are not going to go away. Their electoral representation has always been low but these cadre based parties are the best organised. Over the past few years they have expanded their activities throughout the country and in every sector of society. They have cells in the armed forces, in trade unions and in universities. There is a sizeable presence in the Railway workers union and in the Pakistan International Airlines union.

The fundamentalists have moved with the times. When I was in student politics, the student wing of the Jamiat banned students in hostels watching videos, because these would import decadent western values and Indian popular culture or could be pornographic. Now at their rallies they play popular music. Televisions are no longer frowned upon. Like other fundamentalist parties around the world they have a welfare wing which draws them political support. This has brought them into contact with the poor and they are the most vocal on social questions. When as frequently happens the police harass and abuse common people, it is the youth wing of these parties which marches to the police station and demands an end to this misconduct. If the Left doesn't get its act together, unite its forces and rediscover its role as tribunes of the people for economic justice, social justice including women's equality, land reform and so on the Jamiat will reap the benefits.

The western media lavished a great deal of attention on the former international cricketer and lately social activist Imran Khan. They were intrigued by this Oxford University product, socialite and now son-in-law of the billionaire businessman Sir James Goldsmith. However Khan's Tehrik-i-Insaf (Movement for Justice) polled very poorly.

By highlighting the issue of corruption which was the sole plank of his party's electoral campaign, Imran Khan really played into the hands of the establishment. He was given a lot of air time to call for corruption charges to be slapped on the Bhuttos. In other words he was furthering the agenda of the military. The establishment sees corruption only in politicians because they are public figures. The corruption of the bureaucracy and the military is hidden. People are encouraged to loathe politicians. They are being persuaded to lose belief in the electoral process. This of course can only strengthen the argument for a political role for these unelected forces. Imran Khan had nothing to offer in his political programme. He campaigned on the basis of his personal charisma. He didn't have a team or a vision.

Whatever he may think he is not a man of the people. He is aloof and arrogant. The allegations made about his fathering a child which he has refused to accept as his own also damaged him. He keeps company with the most corrupt individuals in Pakistan and invited many of them to his wedding but at his election rallies he promised to hang the corrupt upside down. He was always going to be a marginal figure and it was only the western media which gave him prominence.

Before the elections the caretaker government created the Council for Defence and National Security. Is this a new institutional role for the President and the Armed Forces?

The Council will act to deflect any demands made by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for the reduction of the military budget which consumes 40% of national income. All economic policy has to be vetted by this institution. This means they can strike a bargain with multi-lateral lending institutions, to protect their privileges and pass the social costs of the structural adjustment program onto the poor. Another dimension is that under the aegis of this Council, the President has improved his own standing vis-a-vis the office of the Prime Minister and has concentrated more power in his own hands. There are tensions between the Chief of the Army Staff, General Jahangir Karamat and the President on this score. General Karamat may suspect the President is trying to undermine the role of the military through the Council. The military has certainly strengthened its vice like grip over the country and the Nawaz Sharif government recognises this.

The caretaker government appointed a Pakistani vice-president at the World Bank, Shahid Javed Burki as Special Economic Advisor. This unelected technocrat introduced the economic reform program which has been inherited by the new government.

The World Bank and Pakistani governments have a long relationship going back to the early 1950s when economic policies were framed by the Harvard School of Economics. Harvard university had a scholarship scheme through which it attracted the brightest Pakistani students and trained them. Mohammad Shoaib, during Ayub Khan's regime,

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was Finance Minister and when he wasn't - he was working for the World Bank. Then came Mahbub-ul-Haq who likewise served military regimes and when not doing so, was attached to either the World Bank or later the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). He was the architect of the first Five Year Plan, Finance Minister, Chairman of the Planning Commission. The two most recent Caretaker governments in 1990 and between November 1996 and February 1997 have been effectively headed by current employees from senior levels of the World Bank.

This has paved the way for the introduction of anti-poor austerity measures which even nominally democratic governments could not afford to bring in. Shahed Javed Burki is also the author of a book on the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government between 1971 and 1977 which was extremely critical of its economic record. In that book he also argued that if any democratically elected government tried to revert to the populist policies of that period it would be ruined. Well he finally got his shot at handling the economic portfolio. Burki was shuttling between Islamabad and Washington DC to plead with the World Bank to release more loans for Pakistan which they didn't do. However what they did give him was a blueprint for an incoming government. A few days before the election, Nawaz Sharif was given a briefing by Burki and his team on this economic plan and left certain that he would be expected to stick to and implement it once in office.

The foreign debt is around US\$30 billion and debt-servicing consumes 45 per cent of the budget. The Caretaker government removed state subsidies for staple foods and necessities. The price of sugar increased four times in those few months, from Rs. 10 per kilo to Rs. 31 per kilo. [60Rs. =1 US dollar] The price of ghee [cooking oil] has reached Rs. 80 per kilo. Similarly with wheat flour, milk-powder etc. and cement, electricity and gas. The cost of transport from bus fares to rail fares. You can see the effects of these policies on the faces of the poor. They are so hard pressed that they find it difficult to even breathe.

Privatisation will be accelerated by the new government. How are trade unions responding?

Since 1990 there has been large-scale privatisation. Nawaz Sharif's political and business friends profited by this and likewise under Benazir Bhutto, her friends have been the major beneficiaries of these sell-offs. There hasn't been widespread opposition to privatisation. Many trade unionists see the floating of the Allied Bank of Pakistan as a model. The bank workers and management bought a majority stake in this bank and its financial situation has improved. Trade unionists see this as a future strategy. A way to protect jobs while maintaining profitability.

Trade unions were prominent in the 1960s with the expansion of the industrial working class and a left wing movement. If trade unions confine themselves to wage bargaining and do not understand the ceaseless clash between Capital and Labour, then they cannot go forward as a political movement. Trade unions and the Left supported Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and propelled him into power. However their militancy was too threatening to him and he curbed them. However I am optimistic that they are beginning to revive themselves.

There is a small core of independent trade unions and left wing activists who are trying to mobilise on anti-privatisation issues and they have formed a loose network which is a promising start. Aside from this there was also an electoral coalition formed at these elections based upon progressive trade unionists and left wing groups including the Pakistani affiliate of the Committee for a Workers International. It stood on a clearly workers agenda.

Historically the Pakistani Left [3] has always been entangled with bourgeois parties and more recently in the Peoples Party. We are at an embryonic stage but this is a welcome break and the foundations are being laid for the future. The road ahead of us is long. General Zia-ul-Haq not only crushed popular opposition but also de-politicised the youth. This generation knows nothing about politics and left wing ideologies. Instead they understand politics only along ethnic, clan and regional and religious sectarian lines.

Key dates

1947 - 1957 Multi-party system with Muslim League and Republican Party. 1958 - 1969 Field Marshall Ayub Khan's martial law regime.

1969 - 1971 Ayub Khan forced out by popular movements and hands power to new army chief, General Yahya Khan

1971 -1977 Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party comes to power.

1977 - 1985 Bhutto ousted in military coup and subsequently hung to death. General Zia-ul-Haq becomes Martial Law Administrator

1985 - 1988 Non-party elections. Zia becomes President. Martial law is lifted.

1988 - 1990 Zia dies in plane crash. Benazir Bhutto's PPP comes to power.

1990 - 1993 Benazir Bhutto's government dismissed by President. Caretaker government of Moeen Qureshi takes over. When elections are held, Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League elected.

1993 -1996 Nawaz Sharif's government dismissed by the President. Benazir Bhutto returns to office. November 1996, PPP government is dismissed by President. The care-taker government is headed by Prime Minister Meraj Khalid though many believe that President Farooq Leghari holds real power.

1997 Nawaz Sharif is elected.

[1] The Awami National Party is a successor to the National Awami Party which was a left-wing party led by Maulana Abdul Hamid Bashani who was a Maoist. In the North-West Frontier Province, Wali Khan was its best known figure. His father, Ghafar Khan had close ties with the Congress party in India and was dubbed the "Frontier Gandhi".

[2] Zardari is accused of the murder of Benazir Bhutto's brother and bitter political rival, Murtaza. He was killed in a shoot-out with police in September 1996. Few believe that Zardari ordered the murder. Instead he is a convenient scapegoat. Murtaza Bhutto's Lebanese-born widow, Ghinva, now leads his party (which won only one seat) seeking punishment for his true assailants. She is the latest in the long line of "widows in politics" in South Asia.

[3] The Communist Party in post-partition Pakistan was the remnant of the Indian Communist Party which anyway had been weak in those regions. The main leader of the Communist Party migrated from India to rebuild it. However the Cold War environment and the close relationship with the United States of America government contributed to the crushing of this party. In the notorious Rawalpindi Conspiracy case of 1958, the main leaders were rounded up and jailed. The Communist Party never recovered.