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Pakistan

Zero fervour for elections

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No election excitement. No street corner meetings or large-scale public rallies. The main leadership of those parties participating in the elections plan no national tours. It could be the most colorless election in the history of Pakistan.

The reasons are simple: General Musharraf wanted it that way. Before announcing the date for the general elections, he imposed martial law. He arrested over 10,000 political activists and lawyers, removed all the top judges, amended the constitution and got himself elected as "civilian" president. He wanted five more years in power.

General Musharraf's allies made all the arrangement to "win" the elections before announcing the date. They wanted a snap election where the opposition would have no time to mobilizing its base. It was to be a general election held without an independent judiciary, with a dependent Election Commission, and with repression still alive. This was the ideal circumstance for a "win."

Pressured by American and British imperialism, Musharraf was forced to implement a power-sharing deal with the Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). However, supporters of military rule, having enjoyed all the power during Musharraf's first eight years, opposed the deal, dragged their heels and set up hurdles.

Following Musharraf's imposition of emergency law, the lawyers' movement rightly demanded that political parties boycott the fraudulent election. The majority agreed, including former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his Muslim League (PMLN). But the PPP kept its bargain and Benazir Bhutto began her vigorous campaign. It was her unfortunate assassination on 27 December 2007 that shocked the whole world. Had the PPP leadership then demanded Musharraf's immediate resignation, he would be gone by now.

Following Benazir's assassination the PPP leadership wanted to cash in on sympathy votes and demanded that the 8 January election not be postponed. Nonetheless the Election Commission proposed the general elections until 18 February 2008, providing Musharraf supporters with a breathing space.

The mass reaction after Benazir Bhutto's death opened the lid on the economic crisis: There was shortage of everything, from wheat flour to electricity. Musharraf's claim that he provided eight years of uninterrupted economic boom was shattered within few days. The long queues in front of public Utility Stores across Pakistan revealed the desperate situation the masses were living in.

The lawyers' movement did not retreat. It has continued to demand the release and reinstatement of the country's top judges. They are still actively supported by civil society organizations and the students. Despite the reality that the lawyers' demand is one of the most popular issues of the day, both the PPP and PMLN decided to participate in the February general election.

The combination of Benazir Bhutto's assassination, the economic crisis and the boycott appeal of both the lawyers movement and the All Parties Democratic Movement has minimized election fervor. If the 18 February election does take place, the PPP will get a massive sympathy vote from those going to the polls. But not much will change because the PPP leadership has already made it clear that it is willing to work with Musharraf.

The PPP has nothing to offer to the people of Pakistan. It believes in privatization and it is happy to go along with the imperialist policies for the region. In fact this is not a new turn for the PPP; it has gone along with these policies for

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long time. The same is true for Nawaz Sharaf's PMLN. In fact all those participating in the elections share one common goal with Musharraf: a continuation of the present economic reforms.

All those on the Left who expected an election where there would be a mobilization of masses and, consequently, a chance to work among them must be very disappointed. This is not an ordinary general election. This is a very calculated plot on the part of the Musharraf dictatorship to continue for the next five years with the collaboration of those who will be elected. This is not an election that can mobilize the masses to build a movement that could overthrow the dictatorship after the elections. But there is a growing movement against the military dictatorship.

The Pakistan Peoples Party is paying the price of its participation in the election, at least among the most active strata of society. The PPP lawyers once had the support of over 80 percent of Bar Association of Pakistan. However, recent Bar Association election results reveal an opposite trend.

The Lahore Bar Association elections show that the PPP-nominated president got less than 400 votes. The Awami Jamhoori Tehreek, (the Left alliance) candidate received 1075 and lost by less than 100 votes. The brother of Marxist PPP former Member of Parliament (the Ted Grant group) was also badly defeated for Qasur Bar Association president. The Labour Party Pakistan Punjab chairperson received the highest number of votes for the executive board. The elections were won by supporters of Hamid Khan group.

At the Multan High Court Bar Association meeting on 4 February, the Bar's president attempted to defend the PPP decision to participate in the fraudulent February election, agitating lawyers forced him to stop speaking. Earlier, in another incident at Lahore University of Management, the PPP and PMLN representatives had to face angry students and civil society activists who were shouting for a total boycott.

So far the election campaign is limited to newspaper and television advertisements, billboards, stickers, banners and posters. There are no local public meetings. Unlike in the past, the candidates' temporary offices look deserted. The PPP is counting on sympathy votes and it believes that it does not need a mass public campaign, as was the case in the past. At the same time both the PPP and PMLN are already complaining about Musharraf's supporters plan to rig the vote.

The lethargy toward this election is a phenomenon that deserves serious examination. How many would go to the polls was unclear, but it is clear from all indicators that it will be the most hollow election in the history of Pakistan.