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Pakistan

A dictator defeated

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Liaquat Bagh: the lush green garden in Pakistan's northern town of Rawalpindi was witnessing a very different scene on February 18 as the night set in.

Unlike the bloody Benazir tragedy staged on its gates on December 27, it was a thousands-strong crowd, cheering and chanting. Waving Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) flags, chanting Jeay Bhutto (long live Bhutto) youth would embrace and congratulate even those carrying PML (N) flags. For years, led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, PML (N) was Benazir's PPP main rival. The PPP and PML (N) went to polls even on February 18, as Pakistani electorate used its right to vote for 9th time since 1970, as rivals. They all were happy as pro-Musharraf candidate, Shaikh Rashid, had been defeated in this constituency. This very constituency, NA 55, had become focus of media attention across Pakistan since it was here Benazir was murdered. Also because it was here Musharraf regime's spokesperson Shaikh Rashid, former Information Minister, was contesting elections. He had been winning, five times in total, from this constituency since 1988. He used to be a leader of PML (N) but he changed sides in 2002 and joined pro-Musharraf PML (Q), commonly mocked as Musharraf League. Being Information Minister, Rashid used to defend regime's unpopular actions thus becoming most hated face on TV screens after Musharraf's own (now-a-days-fast-wrinkling) face.

Fearing his defeat in NA 55, Rashid was also contesting from NA 56, another constituency in Rawalpindi. I happened to meet Rashid three days before elections. Defeat was written on his face.

For the fear of bomb blasts, I travel by taxi instead of public buss. Though taxi is no guarantee yet it helps get a sense of security even if it is false. Every time I would take a taxi before elections, I would question the driver: 'who gonna win Rawalpindi'. Every time, literally every time, the answer was same: 'whoever but no chance for this b@*!@^d Rashid'.

Long before TV channels had announced, Rawalpindi residents on the evening of February 18, had found out that Rashid had lost in both constituencies. In first-past-the-post system, like Britain, Rashid was not even runners up. It was PML (N) candidates, winning both constituencies while PPP-men were runners up.

Rashid was not the only victim of voters' wrath. Another 22 ministers, including president of pro-Musharraf PML (Q), Shujaat Hussein had lost. Like Rashid, Shujaat also lost from two constituencies. By next morning, it was clear that PML (Q) had lost.

An accompanying pleasant surprise was the crushing defeat of fundamentalists. In 2002 elections, fundamentalists had emerged as third largest force bagging 66 National Assembly seats while forming their government in Frontier province (NWFP). They had clean swept NWFP in 2002. This time they were swept aside themselves. Only three seats in National Assembly.

In NWFP, it was secular nationalist Peoples National Party (ANP) that had emerged as largest party while Bhutto's PPP as second largest. The ANP claims the legacy of Ghaffar Khan, known as Frontier Gandhi. Traditionally, NWFP has been a stronghold of ANP that used to be proud of anti-imperialism, secularism and Pashtun-nationalism. Until 1980s, pro-Moscow Communist Party of Pakistan (legally banned in Pakistan since 1951) used to work inside ANP's predecessor (NAP or National Peoples Party). The ANP in 1990s, joined hands with right-wing PML (N) to build a coalition government. The ANP ministers proved no different when it came to corruption and financial scandals. By now, it had also given up any pretext of anti imperialism and had reconciled itself with End-of-History mantra. In the wake of S11, ANP instead of opposing US invasion of Afghanistan, lent it full support. The fundamentalists

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vehemently opposed it. The NWFP, country's third largest province, is inhabited by Pashtun (largest ethnic group in Afghanistan). Hence, tribal population in NWFP saw it as an attack on Pashtuns. Fundamentalists cashed on both religious and nationalist sentiments. They portrayed it as a battle between Islam and 'Christian West'. The ANP, already discredited owing to the corruption of its ministers, by now had also build itself an image of the US pawn. Hence, it was decimated in 2002 elections. It did not win even as a single mandate for National assembly. This time, it has ten mandates in National Assembly, emerging as fifth largest party in National Assembly.

The largest in National Assembly, bagging 87 seats out of 272, is Bhutto's PPP that emerged strongest in Sindh, Bhuttos' home province. However, it was the only party that showed strong presence in all four provinces. Not so distant runners up was PML (N), bagging 67 National Assembly seats but emerging as largest party in Punjab, country's biggest province. In Balochistan, PML (Q) got maximum seats but failed to muster simple majority. Most likely, PPP will be able to build a coalition government here.

The left in Pakistan, never a strong force in electoral politics, was further marginalized. Last time, member of a Trotskyist group, entrist in PPP, had a member elected to National Assembly as PPP candidate. He badly lost this time. The constituents of AJT, an alliance of all major left formations including Trotskyist Labour Party, had joined APDM. The APDM, an alliance of 25 parties including extreme right to extreme left, had announced a boycott of elections on the plea that elections would help Musharraf regime survive. Prior to the murder of Benazir, their campaign was picking up but the situation, it seems, radically changed after the tragic assassination. It generated a sympathy wave for PPP that also translated into high turn out despite threats of suicide bombings.

At the time of filing this report, negotiations are going between movers and shakers. The US, also shocked at election results, is pushing PPP to build a coalition government with pro-Musharraf forces while helping Musharraf stay in power. The PPP, has not taken a clear stand on impeaching Musharraf while Nawaz Sharif and media are demanding his resignation. Given the mood in Pakistan, any party going with Musharraf will be finding it hard to find a place in future political scenario here in Pakistan. Meantime, rumours are making headlines that Musharraf is resigning.