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BACKGROUND 2007-08

**PAKISTAN:  
ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS**

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## PAKISTAN ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS

In 2007 several tumultuous events in Pakistan regularly made big international headlines, bewildering both Pakistani's and a largely uninformed Western public. In March, Chief Judge Iftikhar Chaudry was suspended by president Musharraf on charges of corruption and nepotism, after his refusal to step down. Unexpectedly, the streets in Pakistan's cities filled with masses of furious protestors, instantly making a shining icon of democracy of the stubborn judge in the process.

In July a bloody clearing of hundreds of heavily armed militants who had barricaded themselves in the Lal Masjid in Islamabad by thousands of military marked the beginning of increased explosive violence in all parts of the country. The 'Number Two' of al-Qaeda, Mr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, did his part in calling for attacks, including suicide bombing, against government targets – which were duly carried out. The 'Pakistani Taliban' obviously aimed at the overthrow of the present military regime, to install in its turn an undoubtedly equally, if not more repressive, Sharia-regime itself. After all, neighbouring Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 still is a vivid, horrifying example of the rigid religious and social 'order' that the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership have in mind. The ongoing 'Talibanisation' process in Pakistan had clearly reached the once serene capital, and was further spreading death and terror nationwide.

To all of those who had not figured it out yet, the bloody Lal Masjid affair unequivocally underlined the direct, narrow links between numerous radical madrassas and increasing militancy. It abruptly ended the 'appeasement', if not active support, approach the government had maintained for too many years. A clear dividing line can now be drawn between 'moderate' and 'radical' Pakistani Islamic leaders and politicians. Under the present circumstances it is hard to imagine that Secret service (ISI) elements will continue to facilitate and support Taliban activities.

Surprisingly again, most Pakistani not at all seemed to mind the storming of the mosque and the few hundred victims this created. An estimated 75 to 80 percent of the 160 million Pakistani consider themselves to be moderate, mainstream muslims, an often overlooked fact. The few thousand protestors that took to the streets once the siege and clearance of the mosque were over indicated as much. As one commentator stated, a few thousand people out of a population of 160 million, with no democratic or popular mandate whatsoever, demanded a fundamental change in the social system, tacitly supported by some politicians. (Haider K Nizami, *Daily Times*, July 13, 2007.) The majority of Pakistanis are reportedly fed up with terrorism and militancy, much like the Western public.

A few days after the carnage in the mosque Chief Judge Chaudry was re-installed by the Supreme Court as head of that Court, a truly historic and far-reaching decision, and to the embarrassment of the president and his civilian prime minister since August 2004, Shaukat Aziz. Both had pledged in advance to respect the outcome of the judicial verdict on Mr. Chaudry's position. Mr. Chaudry lost no time in announcing several measures to promote democracy and free elections, undoubtedly well aware of the fact that a next attempt to remove him from his elevated post would create another firestorm in the country, possibly forcing the military government to declare a state of emergency.

The consequences for the position and staying-power of Musharraf (but, remarkably enough, hardly for the military rule in general) of both these events have been busily debated. Some commentators argued that the president actually saw his position strengthened, by forcibly showing that 'militancy' no longer would be tolerated in the country. Pak TV showed a stern-looking president, announcing that 'extremism and terrorism would be defeated in every corner of the country'. The security forces in the NWFP were to be expanded and the unruly Swat-valley, arguably filled with extremists, was occupied. The existing agreement between the government and the Taliban concerning Waziristan was unilaterally cancelled by the 'Pakistani Taliban'.

Others foretold the inevitable coming demise of the president, creatively mentioning more likely or less likely reasons and 'scenarios'. These ingenious Islamabad-watchers seldom could, or cared, to say who would come or what would happen next. Admittedly a very risky affair anyway in and about Pakistan, especially when some 'new factors' developed rapidly. One such a new factor is made up by the uneasy realisation that, for once, the military indeed is the only force in the country that can prevent a future takeover by radical islamist groupings. Even in the - highly unlikely - event that a civilian government comes to the fore after the upcoming September-October elections, it will not be able to maintain itself in power without the full cooperation of the armed forces.

## **Why hold elections?**

As if all this is not enough, in September or October the world will be witnessing another spectacular event in Pakistan, promising even more media-fodder. National and provincial elections will be held, and this time the stakes are particularly high. Will the military be able to continue in power, after having already ruled the country for eight years? Or will the Pakistani electorate decide otherwise? The outcome will largely decide the result of the presidential election, due in December, as well, since the president is indirectly chosen by an assembly of all members of the Senate, the National Assembly and the provincial parliaments.

As such, the upcoming national and provincial elections may be seen as some sort of referendum on the pros and cons of military rule à la Musharraf.

Inevitably, there already is a lot of talk about rigging of the upcoming popular vote, in favour of Musharraf and his cronies, of course. Musharraf has repeatedly and publicly announced his candidacy, seeking another period as leader of the country since a rigged referendum in April 2002 put him there. He has also stated that the present parliamentarians, the majority of whom support him in 2002, should determine who will be the president of Pakistan for the next five years.

This earned Musharraf a lot of criticism, validating the question why national and presidential elections should be held at all, apart from satisfying the Western allies of Pakistan and meeting the requirements of the constitution? Are there any other serious contenders for the post anyway? To add insult to injury, Musharraf made it clear that he does not intend to take off his Chief of the Army Staff uniform, a resolve that will be challenged by all opposition parties before the Supreme Court. The general's wish is understandable, though: the army remains his power base, and usually soldiers make notoriously bad politicians, or economists, for that matter. Musharraf is no exception to this paradigm, considering the way he handled the case of the Chief Judge of the Supreme Court, Chaudry.

The present military regime has entrenched itself firmly in Pakistan's society; no previous military regime in Pakistan has placed so many military men in business, commerce and industry. Many civil servants within the government bureaucracy nowadays originate from the army as well, thus severely limiting the civil input in that august apparatus. To be able to challenge this well-entrenched military-bureaucratic system, any civilian political party must muster huge popular forces. This, at the moment, seems to be an impossible task for any political party, whether it concerns the PPP, PML, or the coalition of six religious parties opposed to Musharraf, the MMA. Initially, the MMA cooperated with the military government, thus moderating the hardliners' hostility to it. Presently the coalition is led by veteran politician Qazi Hussain Ahmed and, at least formally, seeks to install a democratic system of government in Pakistan.

On top of that, Musharraf continues to receive solid diplomatic and financial support from the United States. As in the days of former military dictator Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), to whom we largely owe the present day existence of more than 13.000 madrassas in Pakistan alone, Pakistan was again declared a frontline state by the American government, this time in the global war against terror. So far an estimated 10 billion dollar went to Islamabad since October 2001, and, equally pleasing to the regime, the first of twelve F-16 fighter planes have finally been delivered to Pakistan. As president Bush declared after the clearance of the Lal Masjid: "Musharraf is a strong ally in the war against these extremists. I like him and appreciate him". Clearly, the American president still considers Musharraf the only viable option to 'something worse'.

Every Pakistani vividly remembers the 'free' parliamentary elections of 2002 that gave the Musharraf-led governing group some legitimacy. Why, many people wonder aloud, should the final result of these elections be any different from the previous one? Why, indeed? Maliks, tribal elders, mollahs, sardars, and, increasingly, military landowners as well, still carefully instruct their subordinates in their electoral districts whom to vote for. The one classical thing people can do in these circumstances is not vote. This is precisely what happened in 2002, when not even a quarter of all voters took the trouble of going to an election station at all; not exactly a great stimulant to the functioning of a democratic system.

The billions of dollars that Pakistan has received since 2001 largely went into military pockets but not to the marginalized, cash-starved educational system, for instance. Illiteracy remains high in Pakistan, especially among women; as a consequence, people are generally not able to independently inform themselves. At the same time, the participation in the elections by political parties like Benazir Bhutto's PPP and Nawaz Sharif's PML is far from certain, although together these two parties would reportedly receive 40 to 45 percent of the vote.

Benazir Bhutto has declared to be willing to cooperate with Musharraf, in spite of earlier declarations of solidarity with the unified opposition, including Nawaz Sharif. Bhutto insists that Musharraf gives up his army post, and thus will stand as a civilian candidate in the presidential elections. Bhutto also is adamant that the newly elected assemblies, and not the present ones, choose the president. At the time of the storming of the mosque in Islamabad, representatives of the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy were meeting in London. It is likely that Mrs. Bhutto's PPP will obtain a number of posts in a new government, once Musharraf has been maintained in power by the current . If, however, Judge Chaudry and his Supreme Court succeed in blocking this decidedly unconstitutional procedure, leaving it to the newly elected parliaments instead to select a president, things look less rosy for the PPP. Musharraf, or his military successor, will not be too eager to share power with a popular political party. Sensing weaknesses and dilemmas in Islamabad, Mrs. Bhutto has pledged to return to her country soon to start campaigning.

Traditionally, the Pakistani military consider themselves to be the only force that can guarantee the security and stability of the country, primarily against Indian hostility, whether imagined or real. In this respect the occupants of the Lal Masjid seriously miscalculated on the reaction of the military leadership when they demanded the immediate formation of a truly Islamic state under Sharia rule. At the same time, this 'exclusivist' point of view leaves civilian politicians in the cold. They need to cooperate closely with the military leadership, whether in power or pulling strings behind the screens, to be able to achieve anything at all. The Pakistani voters are only too well aware of all this. Besides, both the PPP and the PML, not surprisingly, were largely unable to realise their political agenda's when they actually were in power. The lead-

ers of these parties were considered to be notoriously corrupt; as a result, both Bhutto and Sharif have been banned from the country and to this day live abroad.

So, if the military regime is not seriously threatened by civilian political parties both moderate and radical or mass movements, is there any development that does make the leadership feel uneasy at all? A number of analysts point their finger at the increasing 'islamisation' (by which is meant 'radicalisation') within certain layers of the Pakistan army. Generally, this process supposedly takes place within the lower and middle ranks, and in particular within the Air Force. As for now, the officer corps probably cannot be characterized as 'radical Islamist' – but individual officers can. A foiled attempt to remove Musharraf in 2004 originated in the Air Force.

After the army had started attacks on militants in South-Waziristan in 2004, hundreds of soldiers and officers refused to pick up arms, openly questioning the Islamic validity of their actions. A number of officers subsequently received severe sentences, including the death penalty. At the same time, hundreds of tribal maliks in Waziristan who lent their support to the government troops got killed by militants, or fled. Over 700 Pakistani troops had been killed since 2003. No wonder the army concluded a peace deal with the 'Neo' Taliban, first in March 2005, and again in September 2006, leaving the border area under their solid control, and thus creating a safe haven for al-Qaeda camps. Yet, even when ordered to shoot at its own citizens in the Lal Masjid, no cases of mutiny by army personnel are known.

At the same time the government, increasingly left without national popular and political support, discretely prescribes to the Pakistani press what to publish and, especially, what not. Under these tense conditions an election campaign is supposed to be held. It promises to be a short, violent affair. In the end Pervez Musharraf has only two options left: to install a state of emergency, or take off his uniform and, as a civilian president if elected, try to reconcile soldiers and politicians. That would be a grand, but unlikely gesture by a beleaguered president. To be continued...

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