

Pakistani election reveals growing opposition to Musharraf

By Vilani Peiris
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Pakistan's ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, held carefully stage-managed national elections on October 10 in an effort to provide his military regime with a measure of political legitimacy. The results, however, and the low voter turnout reveal a growing hostility to the US-backed junta and to the continued presence of US troops, police and CIA agents in the country as part of the Bush administration's "war on terrorism".

Less than half of the country's 40 million voters—just 41 percent—cast a vote. The figure is well below the turnout of 71 percent for a referendum earlier in the year to sanction Musharraf as president. In both cases, the figures have been inflated by ballot stuffing, which has been widely alleged.

Even with its monopoly of the state apparatus and press, the military-backed Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) could only win 77 of the 272 constituency seats being contested. The military formed the party by engineering a split in the Pakistan Muslim League. So-called independents backed by Musharraf won another 29 seats, leaving the junta well short of an outright majority. Another 70 members of parliament are to be appointed as representatives of women and national minorities.

Although the PML-Q won 77 seats, its share of votes was 7.33 million or 24.81 percent—less than the 7.39 million voters who supported the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto, which won just 62 seats. The Pakistani Muslim League (PML-N) of Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted by Musharraf in a military coup in 1999, received 3.32 million votes but gained only 14 seats.

Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a six-party alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, increased its seats from two to 49 to become the third largest party in parliament. The grouping, which called for a withdrawal of US bases and troops from Pakistan, won most of its seats in the backward border areas of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan by exploiting growing hostility to the US presence.

The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a party based on Muslims who fled India during the partition of the

subcontinent in 1947, won 12 seats. In all, 72 parties have contested the elections—most failed to win any seat.

The entire electoral exercise was thoroughly anti-democratic. Prior to the election, Musharraf changed the country's constitution by presidential decree to ensure that former prime ministers Bhutto and Sharif could not stand. He also imposed high education qualifications on candidates, ensuring that many people would be ineligible.

Under the constitutional changes, Musharraf can dismiss the government and provincial assemblies and has wide powers to appoint and dismiss judges as well as the military top brass. He will retain an effective veto over all government decisions through the establishment of a National Security Council, over which he will preside. As a result, even if Musharraf's opponents hold a majority in parliament, they will have very little effective power.

The European Union, which sent an observer team to Pakistan, has declared that there were serious deficiencies in the conduct of the poll. EU official John Cusnahan, who was part of the team, accused the Pakistani military of "unjustified interference with electoral arrangements and democratic process". He declared that "the Pakistan authorities engaged in a course of action which resulted in serious flaws in the electoral process".

The election was held amid a crackdown by security forces on Islamic fundamentalist militia as part of Washington's "global war on terrorism". As a result, the military was able to use the climate of repression to intimidate and harass its political opponents—Islamic and secular. At the same time, it provided resources and bribes to garner the support of various independents.

In the wake of the elections, all of the parties have indicated their willingness to wheel and deal with the military dictatorship and to form a government under its auspices.

While Bhutto has declared in the past that it was impossible for the PPP to work with Musharraf, her position appears to be shifting rapidly. The *Dawn* newspaper reported on Monday that Bhutto had recently conferred with

PPP parliamentary leader Makhdoom Amin Fahim in Dubai and agreed to explore the possibilities of forming a national government, even with Musharraf's PML-Q. The PPP has held talks with the fundamentalist MMA but insisted that the MMA abandon its call for the withdrawal of US troops from Pakistan.

Bhutto and Sharif backed the Bush administration's invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of US military bases in Pakistan. Bhutto has appealed for support from Washington on the basis that the PPP would be a more effective means for implementing US aims in the region and containing popular opposition.

As a result, the MMA was able to capitalise on the mounting resentment to the presence of US bases and the "anti-terrorist" operations of US special forces, particularly along the country's border with Afghanistan. Musharraf has handed more than 400 suspects to US officials for interrogation. FBI and CIA agents have been heavily involved in hunting down and capturing alleged terrorist suspects in major cities such as Karachi.

The MMA has no principled opposition to the predatory activities of Washington in Pakistan and the broader region. Some of its members have had close ties with the US and the Pakistani military in the past. In the wake of the elections, MMA leader Maulana-Fazal-ur Rehman appealed to Washington to soften its attitude toward Islamic parties. "We would like to have better ties with America, but there will be no compromise on national issues," he said.

Jamaat-e-Islami leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed told an MMA press conference: "We do not need foreign troops... we can defend ourselves." He then indicated his willingness to compromise on the issue, declaring: "We will show flexibility." Questioned by journalists on whether he would allow US troops and FBI agents to operate in Pakistan, he added: "It's negotiable, yes, negotiable."

For its part, Washington has given its seal of approval to the Pakistani electoral sham. US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher declared that "these elections are an important step towards restoration of full democracy in Pakistan". Having thrown his lot in with the Bush administration's "war on terrorism," Musharraf is now regarded in Washington—at present at least—as a useful asset in the region.

Musharraf recently reaffirmed his support for the US during a visit to Turkey where he declared: "Pakistan is and will remain a key member of the coalition against international terror." On October 14, US troops arrived in Pakistan for the first joint military exercises with the Pakistani army in four years. Joint training was put on hold following the nuclear weapons tests by India and Pakistan in 1998.

Musharraf is completely dependent on US support—economically and politically. Pakistan's Finance Minister Shukat Aziz met with World Bank officials in Washington on October 4 to discuss assistance of between \$600 and \$900 million for 2003-2004. He was bluntly told that "funding will depend on the pace and depth of structural reforms".

The reforms demanded by the IMF and World Bank are creating a deep social crisis in Pakistan. Around 40 percent of the population, or about 56 million people, live below the poverty line. According to some estimates, the number has increased by 15 million since Musharraf took power in 1999—a major reason being the destruction of jobs and growth of unemployment produced by the IMF's restructuring policies.

On October 4, thousands of tertiary teachers and students joined rallies in Karachi to protest against the recommendations of a higher education task force that will further undermine universities and colleges. Police arrested 65 students and teachers, including women, when they tried to march toward the governor's residence to deliver a memorandum. The police used tear gas to disperse hundreds of students and teachers who had assembled before the march.

In conditions of growing hostility, Musharraf is increasingly reliant on the opposition parties to contain the opposition to his rule. All of them—the PPP, PML-N and MMA—have indicated their willingness to play their part, firstly by giving legitimacy to the electoral fraud, and secondly by offering to serve in a government alongside the military dictatorship.

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