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Pakistan Elections 2007-2008: Key Players

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In November this year, the world will witness one of the most keenly awaited presidential elections in Pakistan with President Pervez Musharraf seeking a second term from the existing parliament without giving up his uniform. A few months later, in early 2008, will follow the general elections for the National Assembly.

Although Musharraf, as the Army Chief, had taken over the reigns of Pakistan in a bloodless coup on October 12, 1999, he became the President officially in December 2003. This was after the National Assembly, controlled by the Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid-e-Azam (PML-QA), often known as the King's party, passed the 17th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan.

The amendment, which legalised the highly autocratic Legal Framework Order, could not have been passed without the support of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a six-party religious alliance whose relationship with Musharraf has remained contentious since its birth. Many believe MMA was fostered by the Army-ISI establishment to support General Musharraf's claim to power in Islamabad. The new amendment gave Musharraf a five-year term as the President, besides sweeping powers to control and run many civil institutions, and the authority to dismiss the National Assembly and provincial Assemblies. For all practical purposes, the Assembly was made subservient to the office of the President.

Given the nature of Pakistan's politics and military, often difficult to distinguish, it will be worthwhile to draw a thumb-nail sketch of key domestic players who will have a decisive influence on the outcome of the political process in a predominantly military regime.

KEY PLAYERS

PRESIDENT PERVEZ MUSHARRAF

President Pervez Musharraf, in the saddle since October 12, 1999, is seeking re-election for a second term in November 2007 with two caveats—he will be re-elected by the present National Assembly members and will not resign as the Chief of Army Staff.

Contrary to perceptions, the road to re-election may not be smooth. There are chances that the situation in Balochistan and Waziristan might adversely affect Musharraf's position. The killing of popular Baloch leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti in August 2006 has not dampened the rebellion in Balochistan. Military operations are still going on in the area amidst widespread allegations of human rights violations. The Bajaur bombing, the heavy deployment of troops (70,000-80,000) and the increased US propensity to aim and fire artillery guns at terrorist hideouts in Waziristan have created a sense of deep uncertainty in the region.

No less troublesome for Musharraf is the public airing of

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the growing sense of disenchantment among the Pakistan elite as reflected in the two letters written by retired Generals, academics, social activists and political leaders in early 2006, asking President Musharraf to step down in the interest of democracy and the dismay within the military leadership over the bombing of a madrasa in Bajaur.

The judicial crisis created by the suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry in March has added to the sense of instability. Despite dissenting voices within and outside the military, the Pakistan Army leadership, for the present, is firmly behind President Musharraf. In the past six years, through forced retirements and supercession, the President has ensured that the top leadership of the Army remained loyal to him. Besides, the top and middle-rung leadership has been offered comfortable sinecures and high-level appointments in the civilian bureaucracy, lucrative business deals through the welfare foundations controlled by the military, in addition to sizeable plots at highly subsidised prices.

Musharraf is equally sure of the support he can expect to draw from Washington although there are increasing doubts being expressed in the American media about such unqualified help. *The New York Times* even suggested the possibility of the Bush administration looking towards the next General. But Musharraf, well versed in psyops, is quite aware that President George Bush cannot risk a new General in Islamabad so close to his farewell speech. Only Musharraf can bring a bit of cheer in an otherwise gloomy legacy which Bush is poised to leave behind. It is reasonably clear that the Bush administration will back him, despite occasional irritants, till at least one of the three issues—Taliban, Osama bin Laden and Iran—are resolved in favour of Bush.

China too is on Musharraf's side. Significantly, his statements that he would not be quitting as the Army Chief before the elections and that he would be seeking a second term came immediately on his return from China in mid-June 2006.

ISI

The ISI's involvement in Pakistan's politics has been critical. The agency has been regularly used not only to spy on political rivals but also to engineer defections and create situations favourable to the ruling party or the Army.

An early and telling instance of ISI's manipulation of the

political situation in Pakistan took place in the late '60s when violent religious demonstrations were orchestrated throughout the country on the issue of a book written by a Jewish author of Indian descent which reportedly denigrated the Prophet. The ISI was working on the orders of General Yahya Khan to create religious opposition to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's political aspirations.

But it was Zia-ul Haq who used the ISI to manipulate the political system effectively in 1976, coaxing Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, through ISI reports, to call for an early election. Although Bhutto won the elections hands down, Zia took over the reigns alleging widespread poll violations and Bhutto's involvement in the murder of a dissident party leader.

In 1988, the ISI patched together a coalition—Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) or Islamic Democratic Alliance against

Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The agency also arm-twisted Jamaat-e-Islami's newly elected chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed to join the IJI. The agency had no choice but to accept Bhutto as the Prime Minister after her party won more seats than the IJI. To neutralize her influence, the ISI ensured that a young and upcoming leader of Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz Sharief, be elected as the Chief Minister of Punjab, the biggest and richest province of Pakistan.

Benazir, despite valiant attempts to consolidate her power, often played into the hands of the ISI. The agency, for instance, persuaded her to facilitate the meeting of various religious extremist forces, both from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to create, what is today known

as, al Qaida. On the other hand, the agency managed to keep Benazir out of two critical areas of Pakistan's foreign and defence policy—the nuclear weapons programme and the India policy.

In 1990, the ISI not only patched together another grand coalition against Bhutto but also distributed, according to Lt. General Asad Durrani (the ISI Chief in an affidavit in response to a petition filed in the Supreme Court), Rs 60 million to 20 anti-Bhutto politicians. In fact, the amount used in the anti-Bhutto campaign was reported to be nearly Rs 150 million. Not surprisingly, Nawaz Sharief came to power with the help of the ISI and the Army.

In 2002, when Musharraf decided to hold the general elections, the ISI facilitated the formation of the 'King's party'—Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid-e-Azam—mainly by

Since it is obvious that the military will not allow a single-party rule in the country, the ISI's role in working out different coalitions, both in the opposition and in the 'King's party', will become clearer in the months leading up to the elections.

engineering defections, through money and muscle, largely from Sharief's Pakistan Muslim League (PML). There were allegations (mainly from the opposition parties) that intelligence personnel kidnapped and tortured political leaders to browbeat them into joining the 'King's party'.

In the recent past, the ISI has been quite active in whitening down terrorist groups targeting President Musharraf. Since it is obvious that military will not allow a single-party rule, the ISI's role in working out different coalitions, both in the opposition and in the 'King's party', will become clearer in the coming months. The MMA, for instance, is likely to witness changes in power structures, as also the PML-QA.

As part of the backup plan, the Musharraf government is likely to use the agency to create an atmosphere of fear and threat inside Pakistan, allowing President Musharraf to impose an Emergency and postpone the elections or hold elections under heavy military presence. The sacking of the Chief Justice of Pakistan foretells the turn of events likely to unfold in the coming months.

MUTTAHIDA MAJLIS-E-AMAL

While the Army and the ISI were busy keeping Bhutto's PPP and Sharief's PML-N at bay during the 2002 elections, the newly-formed Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (United Action Council) reaped an unprecedented harvest in the elections, winning 53 seats out of the directly contested 272 seats in the National Assembly. Bagging 11.10 per cent of vote, the alliance of six religious parties became the first religious group to rake in the highest number of seats since Pakistan was born. It is the third largest political group in the Assembly, after the 'King's party' and Bhutto's PPP. In North West Frontier Province, the group won 52 out of 99 seats to form the government while in Balochistan, with 14 out of 51 seats, it became a partner in the ruling coalition with the 'King's party', the PML-QA.

Some of the leading lights of the alliance—Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Maulana Samiul Haq and Qazi Hussain Ahmed—have been involved in the creation and propagation of the *mujahideen* culture, providing not only recruits for the Afghan Jihad but also sanctifying it by terming it as a *jihad* or the Holy War. There is no doubt that the political clout of MMA had a dramatic effect on the religious extremist groups which were reeling under a series of ban orders issued by the Musharraf government and being monitored

by the US intelligence and security forces. Though extremist groups like Sipah-e-Saheba of Pakistan (SSP) and its more rabid offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), were officially banned, they operated under various new nomenclatures, providing shelter to al Qaida and Taliban elements.

With the Musharraf regime dithering on cracking down on extremist and terrorist elements in Pakistan, the MMA decided to take on President Musharraf in 2003 by demanding his resignation as the Chief of Army Staff and withdrawal of the Legal Framework Order (LFO) which gave wide-ranging powers to the President. It held nation-wide protests and rallies, staged walk-outs from the National Assembly and generally created an atmosphere of uncertainty by imposing restrictions on women, education and entertainment in the name of Sharia. However, as the protest failed to gather nation-wide momentum, the alliance had

no choice but to give in to back-channel negotiators of President Musharraf who wanted them to let him incorporate the LFO into the Constitution as the 17th Amendment. In return, he promised to give up his uniform in December 2004.

This decision, however, betrayed a division within the religious alliance since the decision to oppose the Bill in the Assembly on the first day of the debate was taken at the behest of Qazi Hussain Ahmed who was abroad when the agreement was signed. One of the factors that might have caused consternation in the Qazi camp in MMA was the manner in which Maulana Fazlur Rehman made himself a part of the two-member negotiating committee of

Liaquat Baloch of JUI and Hafiz Hussain Ahmed of JUI-F and signed the agreement.

The divisions within the MMA have been known for quite sometime, especially among the top leadership. Both Qazi Hussain Ahmad and Maulana Fazlur Rehman have often struck diametrically different notes on issues like Kashmir, peace talks with India and President Musharraf. During the early stages of the talks with the government, both JUI-F and JUI had serious differences over the charter of demands. In fact, an agreement brokered by PML-QA leader Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain and JUI-F had to be abandoned in the face of stiff opposition from Qazi Hussain Ahmad.

The MMA's political clout, to a large extent, is drawn from the explicit and implicit support given by the Pakistan Army. President Musharraf, for instance, recognised the MMA as the

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main Opposition party in the National Assembly despite the fact that Benazir's PPP had 81 members to MMA's 63 members. This was done to create a largely imagined threat of Islamic forces taking over Pakistan, a possibility which the US and other western nations are deeply worried about. Such a situation helped the General to project himself as the only alternative and held back the demand for an early revival of the democratic process in the country.

Another significant point is that religious groups like the MMA can only survive if democratic processes are kept at bay, allowing them to exploit the political vacuum created by President Musharraf's decision to keep Nawaz Sharief and Benazir Bhutto out of the electoral process. Bound by a love-hate relationship, the MMA would depend on the military regime's anathema for anything democratic to consolidate its position in the 2007 elections. The General will, however, exploit the internal feud within the MMA to restructure the alliance to weaken its clout at the Centre.

On their own, none of the MMA leaders can muster enough public support to launch a nation-wide movement against the General. They can, however, ride an Islamic wave created by external events like the cartoon controversy or the Bajaur bombing to garner public support from the rural areas.

The MMA, without the military support, cannot go it alone in the elections. Alternatively, it will have to patch up either with Sharief's PML-N, an old ally or become part of an alliance like the Alliance of Restoration of Democracy. In either situation, the MMA will be faced with the challenge of retaining its identity and political objectives. An alliance will only dilute its image and position on issues like Pakistan's support to the US, military operations in Waziristan and, most important, Kashmir.

NAWAZ SHARIEF

Nawaz Sharief was a public relations officer for his family's steel mill when he was catapulted into the higher realms of Punjab politics by a benevolent Punjab Governor, Ghulam Jilani Khan, who was pleased with senior Sharief's diligence in overseeing the construction of his bungalow. The Governor had in fact recommended the name of Shahbaz Sharief, the younger brother but the senior Sharief wanted the younger one to hold the reigns of the family business. Nawaz Sharief thus became the Finance Minister of Punjab and adroitly built himself to become the Prime Minister.

The Army and the ISI who were looking for an alternative to Benazir Bhutto during the 1990 elections aided his political growth. Sharief was a prominent member of the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) or Islamic Democratic Alliance which was created by Army Chief Mirza Aslam Beg against Benazir Bhutto during the 1988 elections. Although PPP won the elections and Benazir Bhutto became the Prime Minister, the ISI ensured that Sharief became the Chief Minister of Punjab, a province which always had a decisive clout in matters of economy, politics and governance in Pakistan.

Playing true to the ISI script, Sharief made life difficult for Benazir Bhutto, launching a vilification campaign against her government. The bitter duel between them witnessed Bhutto targeting the Sharief family's business interests by filing as many as 160 cases for tax evasion, loan default and other acts of omission and commission. Sharief managed to

weather these threats with the support of the military. When Bhutto was dismissed in 1990, Sharief was the choice of the ISI to become the Prime Minister. Large-scale rigging was reported from across the country with the ISI funneling Rs 150 million through a young, ambitious and ruthless banker, Younis Habib, to buy political favours from a wide spectrum of political entities.

Sharief's honeymoon with the Army, however, did not last beyond two years. Cases of corruption began piling up against him and his ministers. Islamist leaders like Qazi Hussain Ahmed started moving away from him as he courted Altaf Hussain's Mohajir (Muttahida) Qaumi Movement to counter PPP's in-

fluence in Sindh. Sharief also began challenging the President, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, and the Army. Sharief wanted a loyalist as the Army chief when General Asif Janjua died in the saddle in January 1993. The President refused to relent. The confrontation reached a climax in April when Sharief roundly criticized the President. Two days after the address, Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed the Sharief government. Sharief, however, won a brief reprieve when the Supreme Court questioned the Presidential decision and re-instated Sharief. At this point, the Army Chief, General Waheed Karar, stepped in, persuaded both Ishaq Khan and Sharief to resign after calling for elections.

Sharief returned with a convincing margin for his second term as the Prime Minister, bolstered primarily by the dismal performance of Bhutto's second term. Sharief lost no time in settling old scores. Through a constitutional amendment

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(13th), he drastically whittled down the power of the President and gave himself the power to appoint the three Service Chiefs, becoming, in the process, the most powerful man in Pakistan. Sharief then set about ruthlessly curbing dissidence within the party and the government, took up cudgels against the Chief Justice, and subsequently against the Army.

With the US imposing sanctions for the nuclear explosions, the Army, deeply disturbed by Sharief's propensity to subjugate all institutions, including the military, decided to step in. When General Jahangir Karamat criticised his functioning, rather gently, a furious Sharief asked for his resignation. Karamat handed him the resignation and Sharief chose General Pervez Musharraf, a Mohajir officer with considerable support within the army. Sharief's calculation was that a Mohajir officer in a predominantly Punjabi dominated Army would be more compliant.

Either grossly misled by his advisors or blinded by unbri-dled power, it would prove to be his biggest blunder. Musharraf, a commando by training and an ambitious refugee who played by his wits, was not the one to be pushed around by a civilian. Sharief found him increasingly difficult to deal with and decided to replace him with a favourite General of his when the Army closed ranks. Sharief's ouster by a military takeover had become inevitable.

When Musharraf took over as the Chief Martial Administrator on October 12, 1999 Sharief had to rely on the US and Saudi Arabia to persuade the General to save him from a sure trial and, probably, an execution. Musharraf agreed to let Sharief go on the condition that he would not return to Pakistan for 21 years.

President Musharraf has not changed this stance. In fact, he made it quite clear recently that Sharief would not be allowed to return. This should effectively keep him out of Pakistan and weaken his party's influence which has been substantially eroded by defections at the behest of PML-QA. Though Sharief has made valiant attempts at recapturing lost ground by signing the Charter of Democracy with Benazir Bhutto, issuing a charge-sheet against the General on the Kargil issue and raising the pitch on the Bugti killing, in all likelihood such gestures will only have no more than a short-term impetus.

BENAZIR BHUTTO

Benazir Bhutto's rise as a key political leader in Pakistan, a feudal society ruled by Punjabi elites and the Army, is remarkable. Despite strong opposition from the Army and the ISI, Bhutto, an Oxford alumni, became the Prime Minister of Pakistan twice (November 1988-August 1990/October 1993-November 1996), upsetting several political apple carts, both within Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and outside.

Both her strength and failing was the legacy she inherited, both in terms of history and attitude. Like her father, she had an assumed air of royalty and a gross misconception of power which pitted her against the Army and its intelligence agencies.

Unlike Nawaz Sharief who is a creation of the ISI, Benazir remained free which, to a large extent, was her undoing. Like her father, who commissioned a White Paper on Higher Defence Organisation which recommended, among others things, civilian supremacy over military, giving elected representatives the power to appoint the three Service Chiefs and keep a tab on military policies and expenditure. Benazir, for instance, purged the ISI of anti-Bhutto, pro-Zia elements and appointed her own chief against the wishes of the Chief of Army Staff, General Aslam Beg, a conservative General with strong views. Beg was keen on seeing Benazir's defeat at the hustings and wanted Nawaz Sharief to become the Prime Minister.

With political fortunes favouring Benazir instead, Beg ensured that Benazir was kept outside the decision making process in military matters. When she wanted a briefing on the nuclear programme, Beg not only refused it but also denied her entry into the Kahuta Laboratory. Besides the Army, Benazir had many other adversaries to deal with. Her continuous run-in with her adversaries distracted her from strengthening her party and the country. To counter Sharief and the Army, Benazir courted the fundamentalists in Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and played into the hands of the newly emerging terrorist alliance, al Qaida. Saddled with mounting allegations of corruption, orchestrated in no small measure by the ISI, and the bitter feud with Sharief, Benazir's political fortunes remained chequered till she left for the safer environs of London.

Today, she wants to return to Pakistan. President Musharraf says she is free to do so but she will have to face the charges leveled against her. Under pressure from the US, Musharraf has opened a communication channel to her. Unlike Sharief, her strength lies in her party which has considerable clout and support in Pakistan. Besides the MMA, Pakistan People's Party is the only party that can undo the patchwork coalition put together by the General and his men.

She knows that the General will not, despite the back-channel exchanges, allow her to contest the elections as freely as he promises in his speeches. Her chances of becoming a Prime Minister the third time are remote because of a constitutional provision barring a third term. The choices before her are to either wait for the General to collapse under his own mistakes or take a leap of faith this time and return to Pakistan. For this, she would need the backing of Washington.

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