

Pakistan's sham referendum endorses Musharraf as president

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Pakistani authorities have declared that last week's referendum has overwhelmingly endorsed General Pervez Musharraf for a five-year term as president. The result was a transparent sham that surprised nobody and has further discredited the military strongman who seized power in a coup in October 1999.

According to Pakistan's Election Commissioner, 44 million or 70 percent of the country's 63 million eligible voters cast a vote in the April 30 referendum—a huge increase on the turnout in the last parliamentary elections in 1997 of less than 36 percent. Of those that voted, 97.7 percent cast a “yes” for Musharraf, the commissioner claimed.

The major political parties called on voters to boycott the poll and have denounced the result as a fraud. According to their estimates, between 5 and 10 percent of eligible voters cast a vote. Safar Ali Shah, a spokesman for the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) of ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif described the outcome as a “naked fraud,” pointing out that “there has never been a turnout in Pakistan more than 36 percent.” Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) spokesman Razi Rabbani declared: “Musharraf has no moral and political authority to continue and he should step down immediately.”

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) chairman Afrasiab Khattak warned: “The people were given an experience that casts ominous shadows on their path to democratic revival.” His organisation stated: “Apart from anything else the manner in which the people were hustled into voting and the flagrant abuse of election procedures degraded the very concept of democratic choice.”

Prominent newspapers, including the *Dawn*, the *Nation* and the *News*, all questioned the credibility of the referendum result. The *Nation* commented: “The perception building is that this referendum was no more credible than that of Zia.” The reference to the former dictator Zia ul Haq is a pointed one. In 1984, Zia tried to legitimise his rule by holding a referendum—only 5 percent of eligible voters participated but the regime announced a huge majority in favour.

Like Zia, Musharraf called the referendum in a desperate bid to shore up his increasingly isolated political position. In the aftermath of September 11, he was compelled, under heavy pressure from Washington, to break Pakistan's ties with the

Taliban regime and to support the US war on Afghanistan. The decision alienated sections of the military and Islamic fundamentalist organisations on which Musharraf had previously relied.

Last week's poll was a stage-managed affair from start to finish. Musharraf spared no effort or expense to ensure a positive outcome. Billions of rupees were spent in a propaganda blitz to present the general as a man dedicated to the restoration of democracy, in favour of reform and “the elimination of sectarianism and extremism”. The same message was carried on the ballot paper itself—which coloured the “yes” box green, the colour of Islam and the Pakistani flag.

To counter the boycott and bolster the turnout, the voting age was dropped from 21 to 18 and the number of polling stations was increased 10-fold to nearly 87,000. The *Economist* commented: “As bogus political exercises go, this one was a corker. The poll was conducted without the benefit of an electoral register, identity cards were not obligatory and the usual polling stations were supplemented by tens of thousands of makeshift extra ones: in railway stations, offices, on street corners, in hotels. Business and government outfits were leant on heavily to ensure that all their employees voted.”

There were many accounts of ballot stuffing and multiple voting. The *Independent* noted: “There were reports of irregularities, with people voting more than once and only the flimsiest of identification shown to cast a ballot. Voters were supposed to provide drivers' licences and other photo identification, but at one polling station officials accepted a handwritten note from a woman with her name written on it....

“Many of those casting their votes were government employees and needed little prompting to extol the virtues of General Musharraf. In an attempt to enthuse the population, the capital, Islamabad, has taken on a festive air in recent days with pictures of the president bedecking buildings and attached to every lamp-post. An army lorry adorned with flags drove along Jinnah Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare, blaring patriotic music.”

The *Washington Post* reported: “The government took conspicuous pains to suggest an enthusiastic outpouring for Musharraf. In one such effort, the Information Ministry ferried a handful of foreign reporters by helicopter to polling stations

in the North-West Frontier Province municipalities of Peshawar and Abbottabad. At each, the scene was the same:

“On the street, musicians announced the visitors’ arrival—drummer in Peshawar, bagpipers in Abbottabad. Small children threw flower petals. Functionaries beamed. The line of supported voters numbered about 20 or 30 souls who looked expectant, turning to face the visitors with almost martial precision. In Peshawar, the women dropped their veils and burst into applause.”

According to *Agence France Presse* (AFP): “Opposition fears that the lack of an electoral roll would lead to multiple voting and ballot stuffing were justified as many voters openly queued up time and again to make their marks. At one station a woman claimed to have cast a vote 60 times, while schoolgirls well under the qualifying 18 years were seen voting at another.” The ink used to mark the fingers of voters proved to be far from indelible. As one voter told AFP: “I voted eight times as it was not very difficult to remove the ink. I voted in different polling stations without any problems.”

The *San Francisco Chronicle*, reporting from the North-West Province, stated: “Evidence emerged over the course of the day that state machinery may have influenced the results. Many public sector workers complained they had been pressured into casting ballots. At several polling stations, officials and police officers were seen openly encouraging people to vote yes or opening ballots to view the results.”

All of the above was studiously ignored by diplomats from the US embassy and Commonwealth high commissions who conducted an unofficial monitoring operation across the country. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, while there were incidents of small-scale abuse, they found no evidence of a systematic campaign to manipulate the electoral process. “It’s obviously not been rigged at an official level. There is no evidence of widespread rigging that we found,” one diplomat said.

Washington stopped short of giving a complete seal of approval to the referendum. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher declared: “I don’t think there’s really any independent verification of these figures... It is for the Pakistani people to judge what the referendum mean in terms of returning the country to democratic civilian rule.” He then added: “We look forward to October’s provincial and national elections. We believe these elections are the most crucial element in returning the country to democratic rule.”

These remarks do not indicate a newfound interest in democracy on the part of the US administration. Bush embraced the military dictator as a convenient ally during the US war in Afghanistan and will continue to do so in so far as Musharraf proves to be useful. As well as maintaining a discrete distance from an obviously rigged poll, Boucher’s comments also served as a reminder to Musharraf to toe the US line. If not, the implication was, he could quickly find himself reduced from “a leader of great courage and conviction,” as

Bush described him, to political pariah, denounced throughout the international media as an undemocratic thug.

It appears that Musharraf understood the message. In a brief television speech following the referendum, he pledged to implement the economic reforms dictated by the IMF and indicated that “in the days to come a new campaign on terrorism will be announced.” Musharraf has already bowed to US pressure and allowed American Special Forces soldiers to operate alongside Pakistani troops along the border with Afghanistan—a measure that has already triggered angry protests among tribesmen.

As far as the October elections are concerned, there are doubts as to whether they will be held. Even if the poll does take place and an elected government is formed, Musharraf has indicated that he will have the final say via a military-dominated National Security Council (NSC). He told a press conference: “Power is the power to run a government... The prime minister and the cabinet will have that power. The NSC has the power to check misdoings... I am just going to relax and play tennis and golf... but I will not allow him (the prime minister) to run it badly.”

Musharraf’s position is, however, far from secure. In the course of the referendum, he managed to alienate all of the major political parties—even though the PPP and PML have indicated a willingness to collaborate with the military regime. He has fuelled resentment by openly siding with the US invasion of Afghanistan and allowing US troops to operate in Pakistan. At the same time, the implementation of IMF measures will lead to higher unemployment and deepening social polarisation, leading to further anti-government hostility.

The end result is that Musharraf is more isolated than ever. His rule is based on an increasingly narrow stratum in the military and state bureaucracy and heavily reliant on Washington for continuing economic aid and political support. It is not a recipe for political longevity.



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