

Islamic extremists come to power in two Pakistani provinces

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In the wake of the October national elections in Pakistan, an alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), has assumed power in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) for the first time in three decades. In the neighbouring province of Baluchistan, the MMA has struck a deal with the Pakistani Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam (PML-QA)—the party of Pakistan’s military strongman Pervez Musharraf—to form a coalition government.

The MMA was able to increase its vote substantially in the elections by exploiting the growing anti-US sentiment over the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and its impact in Pakistan. At Washington’s insistence, Musharraf has cracked down on Islamic extremist groups, permitted the US military to use Pakistani bases and allowed the CIA, FBI and US Special Forces to hunt down suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban members inside the country.

The NWFP and Baluchistan border Afghanistan and have close tribal and ethnic ties with Afghans. US military and intelligence agents have been particularly active in the tribal areas of the two provinces, provoking widespread anger. In its election campaign, the MMA called for the withdrawal of US forces from Pakistan.

The MMA won 60 seats in the national assembly, placing it third after the PML-QA and the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The grouping won a majority of 68 seats in the 124-member NWFP provincial assembly and 18 of the 65 seats in Baluchistan.

Akram Khan Durani, a leader of the Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI)—one of the MMA’s constituent parties—was elected as the new NWFP chief minister on November 29. He is only the second JUI chief minister after Maulana Mufti Mahmud, who ruled NWFP for nine

months in 1972-73.

Durani indicated that his first priority would be to implement reactionary Islamic laws throughout the state. He called on the regional administration to enforce complete bans on gambling and the sale of alcohol. He also called on public transport owners to stop playing music and movies, and to halt five times each day to allow for Muslim prayers.

On November 30, the MMA’s Jamal Shah was elected to the post of assembly speaker in Baluchistan as part of a deal with the PML-QA, which took the positions of chief minister and deputy speaker. The MMA had been seeking to form a government in its own right with the backing of other minor parties, but switched at the last minute following the intervention of Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali.

Part of the coalition deal included the release of two former MMA provincial ministers, who were jailed in 2000—one for forgery and the other for misuse of power. Baluchistan chief minister Jam Yousaf also ordered the release, from December 6, of all members of Islamic fundamentalist groups that were outlawed by Musharraf in January.

The 12-point coalition agreement includes a ban on the sale of alcohol in the province to Muslims and non-Muslims alike as well as increased provincial funding, the construction of a deep-water port and withdrawal of federal security forces and checkpoints.

In the NWFP, the MMA also demonstrated its willingness to work with Musharraf and the PML-QA. Prime Minister Jamali, who was present at the swearing in of the NWFP chief minister, told the press: “They are our partners there... Nobody should have any apprehensions that someone from the centre would either bother or take some action against the MMA government here.”

Since the election, the MMA has significantly toned down its opposition to the presence of the US military in Pakistan. MMA vice president Qazi Hussain Ahmad declared last month: “We are not extremists. We would like to make bridges with the western world.”

After being sworn into office, new NWFP chief minister Akram Khan told the media that his government would not object to US military operations outside its jurisdiction. “The FBI operation is restricted to tribal areas which do not fall within the limits of the provincial government. I hope the US would respect the people’s mandate in the Frontier Province,” he said.

The collaboration between the MMA and PML-QA in Baluchistan and NWFP is connected to attempts to form a partnership at the national level. Musharraf’s party formed government with a slender majority last month after weeks of backroom haggling. But within a week, one of its coalition partners, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) had pulled out of the alliance, leaving the government without a parliamentary majority.

Since then Prime Minister Jamali has been courting MMA leaders, including Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Qazi Hussain Ahmad—and the MMA is responding. As MMA politician Liequat Baloch told the media on December 5: “We are not in a hurry to oust this government, or move a no-confidence motion against it or form a joint opposition.”

MMA leader Rahman described talks last weekend as “positive”. Previously the MMA had demanded the complete withdrawal of Musharraf’s anti-democratic changes to the constitution, issued by presidential decree prior to the October national elections. The measures concentrate enormous powers in the hands of the president, including to dismiss the government, military chiefs, judges and administrators. Now the MMA is simply asking Musharraf to relinquish his post as head of the armed forces and show his sincerity about the future transition to civilian rule.

But as the MMA is well aware, any deal requires the approval, not only of the military and its party, but also of Washington, on which Musharraf is dependent for political and financial support. That is why, for all the anti-US rhetoric during the election campaign, the MMA leaders are playing down their opposition to the US military and preparing to collaborate with Washington.



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