

Pakistanis overwhelmingly reject US-backed strongman Musharraf

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The Pakistani people overwhelmingly repudiated the US-backed, military-controlled regime of Pervez Musharraf in national and provincial elections held Monday.

According to news reports, parties opposed to Musharraf will hold a substantial majority in the National Assembly and should be in a position to form governments excluding the Musharraf-allied parties in at least three of Pakistan's four provinces.

While the final composition of the National Assembly has yet to be determined (voting in some constituencies was postponed and the allotment of 70 seats reserved for women and "religious minorities" will only be made when the popular vote is completely tallied), the opposition parties appear close to obtaining the two-third's majority that they would need to impeach Musharraf or amend the constitution to radically curtail the president's powers.

The Pakistan Muslim League (Q), the party created by the military-intelligence apparatus to provide a popular fig-leaf for Musharraf's dictatorship, was routed. It finished in third place in the National Assembly election, far behind Pakistan's traditional establishment parties, the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). The PML (Q) also lost badly in the provincial assembly election in the Punjab, the province it claims as its base and which is home to the majority of Pakistanis.

Virtually the entire PML (Q) leadership suffered personal electoral defeat, including PML (Q) President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and most cabinet ministers. A chastened Hussain declared, "We accept the results with an open heart," and "will sit on the opposition benches."

The election results constitute a major blow to the Bush administration, which has defended Musharraf through thick and thin, including his imposition of martial law for six weeks beginning last November 3, his purge of supreme and superior court judges deemed insufficiently pliant, and his patently unconstitutional, stage-managed "re-election" to a further five-year term as president last October.

During the past seven years, Bush has repeatedly hailed Musharraf as a pivotal ally in the "war on terror," justified his autocratic actions as steps toward democracy, and expressed his personal admiration and even affection for the Pakistani dictator.

Under Musharraf, Pakistan has played a vital role in the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and provided the US military-intelligence apparatus with offshore torture sites as well as training grounds and staging areas for US war preparations against Iran.

Even the US press has been forced to concede that a key element in the popular hostility to Musharraf is his close and subservient relationship with Washington. The United States is reviled for having supported a succession of military dictatorships in Pakistan, for its Afghan and Iraq wars, and for the pressure it has placed on the Musharraf regime to ruthlessly suppress the Taliban in Pakistan's Pashtun-speaking tribal and border areas.

At Washington's urging, the Pakistani military has targeted the civilian

population in insurgent areas, sought to exert central government control over tribal areas which since the creation of Pakistan have enjoyed broad autonomy, and arbitrarily "disappeared" Islamic terrorist suspects.

In the weeks prior to the elections, a parade of top US intelligence and Pentagon officials traveled to Islamabad to press Musharraf and the Pakistani military to allow the US military-intelligence apparatus to play an even larger role in Pakistan's anti-Taliban counter-insurgency war.

In the wake of Monday's elections, the Bush administration appears intent on clinging to Musharraf.

"We certainly would hope that whoever becomes prime minister, and whoever winds up in charge of the new government, would be able to work with him [Musharraf] and to work with all other factions," declared US State Department spokesman Tom Casey early Tuesday morning.

Speaking later in the day, the State Department's Sean McCormack stressed that the full, official election results were not known and reiterated the administration's continuing support for Musharraf: "We are going to continue our work with President Musharraf and whatever that new government may be on goals of our interest."

The Bush administration position was seconded by the three US senators who traveled to Pakistan to monitor Monday's elections—Joseph Biden, the Democratic chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate, and Chuck Hagel, a Republican.

At a press conference in Islamabad Tuesday they said that in post-election discussions with Nawaz Sharif and PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari they had "urged them not to dwell on the past but to look towards the future, in the interests of the country."

Said Kerry, "We urge the leaders of the various political parties to put the grudges of the past in the past." In other words, the opposition parties should not challenge Musharraf's presidential mandate—no matter that it was secured through a sham election, the imposition of martial law and a judicial purge.

The results are all the more devastating in that the Musharraf regime went to extraordinary lengths to manipulate and rig the elections.

Musharraf used last year's emergency to impose permanent and draconian restrictions on the press and harass and jail thousands of oppositionists, some of whom remained in jail or under house arrest through Monday's vote. Journalists were threatened and harassed so as not to report on opposition campaigns. Many of those who went to the polls Monday were not allowed to vote because their names did not appear on the voter lists compiled by the pro-government Election Commission.

Neither of the principal opposition leaders were able to contest the elections.

Nawaz Sharif—whom Musharraf deposed in his 1999 military coup, sent into exile after arranging for his conviction on treason charges, and expelled from the country again when he first attempted to return to Pakistan last September—was barred from standing for election on the

grounds he is a convicted criminal.

PPP leader Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on December 27, less than two weeks before the original election date, and just hours before she was to hand over to US lawmakers evidence that Musharraf's allies were planning to rig the vote.

According to GEO Television and *Dawn* reports, the PML (Q) has won just 38 of the 258 National Assembly seats where the results have been tallied, as compared to 87 for the PPP and 66 for Sharif's PML (N).

In the Punjab, where the PML (Q) previously formed the provincial government, it has won just 66 of the 285 declared seats. Its best result was in Baluchistan, which, while resource-rich and geographically large, is far and away the smallest of Pakistan's four provinces.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, or MMA—a coalition of Islamic parties—also suffered devastating losses. While it held some fifty seats in the outgoing National Assembly, it has won just two in the current election, and in the North-West Frontier Province, where it formed the government for the last five years, it has captured just 9 of the 91 seats where results have been tallied.

The MMA postured as an opponent of the Musharraf regime, but clearly benefited from the military regime's support in the staged-managed elections held in 2002. The MMA returned the favor, serving as the governmental coalition partner of the PML (Q) in Baluchistan for the next five years and, more importantly, providing Musharraf with the votes he needed in the National Assembly to pass changes to the constitution that greatly increased the powers of the presidency and created a military-dominated National Security Council with authority over key aspects of government policy.

The MQM, an ally of Musharraf based in the *mohajir* community—that is, those who immigrated to Pakistan from north India when the subcontinent was communally partitioned in 1947—did somewhat better. It captured 19 National Assembly seats, most of them in the environs of Karachi, the Sind province's and Pakistan's largest city.

But the PPP, which has strong roots in Sind—the Bhuttos are one of the province's leading landlord families—has reportedly won an outright majority of the seats in the Sind Assembly.

The PPP made Benazir Bhutto's purported "martyrdom for democracy" virtually the exclusive focus of its campaign.

In 2007, the Bush administration, in an attempt to shore up an increasingly beleaguered Musharraf, sought to broker a power-sharing deal between Benazir Bhutto and her PPP and Musharraf, the military and Musharraf's PML (Q).

Bhutto was more than willing to accept the patronage of Washington and to make a deal with Musharraf. To prove her bonafides to the Bush administration, she repeatedly criticized Musharraf for not doing enough to root out Islamacist extremism in Pakistan. But a deal could never be cemented because of opposition from Musharraf's camp and because the political dynamics shifted as popular opposition to the military regime swelled.

Nevertheless, with an eye to winning Washington's favor, the PPP has never excluded working with Musharraf.

Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, who in feudal-dynastic fashion laid claim to the leadership of the PPP within days of his wife's assassination, has proclaimed that his party, as the largest in the incoming National Assembly, should have the right to form the government. He said he will strive for a coalition of all forces not involved in the previous PML (Q)-led government.

More surprising than the strong showing of the PPP—a party that despite its reactionary record in office continues to have support among sections of Pakistan's toilers because of the populist reforms with which it was associated in the 1970s—was the seat tally for Sharif's PML (N). In addition to winning more than a quarter of the seats thus far decided in the National Assembly elections, it has emerged as the largest party in the

Punjab Assembly.

The PML (N) has traditionally had close ties to the military and to the Islamic right. Nawaz Sharif, who hails from a family of industrialists, began his political career as a protégé of the dictator General Zia. But because of his enmity for Musharraf and connections to the Islamic fundamentalists, Sharif has been seen by the Bush administration as an obstacle.

During the election campaign, Sharif was far more critical of the US than the PPP leadership. He also posed as a more implacable opponent of Musharraf by making the reinstatement of the judges Musharraf purged the focus of the PML (N) campaign.

The fifth largest party in the incoming National Assembly and the largest party in the North-West Frontier Province assembly will be the Pashtun-based Awami Nationalist Party. It appealed to opposition to Musharraf, Islamic fundamentalism and the growing US military presence in the province.

Opposition to Musharraf and the entire political set-up was also expressed in the massive abstention rate. It is estimated that no more than 40 percent of the electorate participated in the elections.

While some voters may have stayed away because of the threat of terrorist attacks, the capitalist press conceded that many poor Pakistanis failed to vote because they saw little to choose between the parties, all of which when in office have defended the interests of the capitalists and landlords and imposed socially incendiary neo-liberal reforms.

Some smaller parties, including several that describe themselves as leftist or socialist, were calling for an election boycott to oppose the unconstitutional and anti-democratic Musharraf regime.

Monday's election sets the stage for a struggle between the PPP, PML (N), other smaller parties, Musharraf and the military over the division of power and patronage.

The military itself is divided over the wisdom of continuing to back Musharraf, whose unpopularity is seen as jeopardizing the extensive economic interests the officer corps have developed, as well as the stability and territorial integrity of the Pakistani state. In recent weeks several hundred prominent retired senior officers have publicly come out in favor of Musharraf's resignation, some even taking the unprecedented step of joining anti-Musharraf protests.

Washington's statements of support for Musharraf are meant as a message to the military, with which the Pentagon has a more than 50-year-old relationship, that the US is intent on guaranteeing its interests in the political realignment now underway.

Bush and US Vice President Cheney, from all reports, feel a genuine affinity for the dictator Musharraf. But ultimately, for US imperialism the real issue is not the personal fate of Musharraf, but ensuring that the military remains the decisive power in Pakistan.

The PPP and PML (N), for their part, will engage in all manner of backroom deals with the military and Washington. The PPP has twice before come to the rescue of the Pakistani bourgeoisie by assuming power when military dictatorships have unraveled. And it has always ensured that the military-security apparatus and Pakistan's subservient alliance with Washington have remained intact.

The new government will assume office under conditions of a growing economic crisis, which has exploded in recent weeks in the form of food and power shortages, after years of capitalist economic growth that benefited only a small privileged minority.

That the PPP or PML (N) made little reference to this crisis in their election campaigns is no accident. They subscribe to essentially the same policies.

Even the *News*, a Pakistani daily, was forced to take note in an election day editorial of the failure of the opposition parties to address the burning social problems facing the Pakistani people: "There is a notable absence in the wordy rhetoric and empty promises of all the main political parties

as polling day draws nigh: Nobody, but nobody, is talking about land reform. None of the major political parties appears to have a commitment to the single most fundamental change that could begin to alleviate the national disaster of poverty—land reform.”

Democracy in Pakistan will not be secured through a sordid deal negotiated behind the backs of the Pakistani people between Washington, the military, and the parties of the bourgeois elite, but only by the working class placing itself at the head of the toiling masses and linking the struggle for democratic rights with a challenge to Pakistan’s reactionary socio-economic order.

Genuine democracy requires the liquidation of landlordism, the dismantling of the US sponsored military-security state, the separation of mosque from state, socialist measures to provide jobs and a secure income for all, and the overthrow of the communal state system that imperialism imposed on South Asia, with the connivance of the Indian National Congress and Muslim League, in 1947-48. It will be realized only in the form of a workers’ and peasants’ government that consciously links the fate of the toilers of Pakistan and South Asia to the international working class’ struggle to put an end to capitalism.



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