

Pakistan's leading opposition parties to form national coalition government

K. Ratnayake, Keith Jones
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In opposition to the wishes of the Bush administration, Pakistan's two principal parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), agreed Thursday to forge a national coalition government and like coalitions in the country's four provinces.

In Monday's election—an election European Union observers admit was skewed against the PPP, the PML-N and other opposition parties—the PPP won about 33 percent of the seats in the National Assembly and the PML-N 25 percent. In the provincial elections in the Punjab, which is home to the majority of Pakistanis, the two parties' positions were effectively reversed.

The PPP, the PML-N and a smaller party with which they have agreed to ally, the Pashtun-based Awami National Party, are all avowed opponents of President Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup and subsequently became a pivotal US ally in the “war on terror.”

After years of promising that he would preside over a return to democracy, Musharraf imposed martial law for six weeks late last year so he could install judges who would give a legal stamp of approval to his unconstitutional reelection as president till 2012. Emergency rule was also used to impose draconian restrictions on the press and intimidate the opposition in the run-up to national and provincial assembly elections.

Opinion polls have long shown that the vast majority of Pakistanis want Musharraf to resign and that the US government is reviled, both because of its support for a succession of military dictatorships in Islamabad and because of its invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The December 27 assassination of PPP head and prime ministerial candidate Benazir Bhutto provoked a national upheaval, in which rioters attacked symbols of the Musharraf regime, including government facilities and offices of the pro-Musharraf party founded by the military, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q).

Yet, according to press reports, the Bush administration was shocked by the PML (Q)'s debacle in Monday's elections. It has been scrambling ever since to try to shore up support for Musharraf.

This has involved both repeated statements from US officials praising Musharraf and urging Pakistan's incoming government to work with him, and behind-the-scenes pressure on the PPP to forge a government that includes the PML (Q) or other parties that have been allied with Musharraf, such as the MMA, an alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, and the MQM, which claims to represent Pakistan's Urdu-speaking mohajir community.

The Pakistani daily the *News* has reported, “Sources in [the PPP] confirmed that the Americans had brought tremendous pressure on the PPP co-chairperson to make a coalition government with the likes of

the PML-Q and MQM, but not with the PML-N.”

This involved the US Ambassador to Pakistan summoning Bhutto's widower and successor as PPP chairperson, Asif Ali Zardari, to the US embassy on Wednesday. For much of last year, Bhutto was in discussions with Washington about a possible partnership with Musharraf. But a three-way deal could never be consummated because of opposition from Musharraf and his allies and the swelling popular opposition to the military-controlled government.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz—which, as its name suggests, is built around its leader, Nawaz Sharif—was excluded from the Bush administration's attempt to give Musharraf greater popular legitimacy through a deal with the opposition. Sharif, his right-wing politics and close connections with the Saudi royal family notwithstanding, has been viewed warily by the Bush administration because of his personal enmity toward Musharraf, who deposed him as prime minister in 1999, and because of his ties to the Islamic fundamentalist right.

On Thursday, after it became apparent that Zardari and Sharif were going to forge a partnership in defiance of US wishes, George Bush telephoned Musharraf. No details of their conversation have been released.

But speaking from Brussels, US Undersecretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher reiterated the US's support for Musharraf. “We look forward to working with President Musharraf in his new role,” declared Boucher. Ignoring the dictatorial methods Musharraf used to reelect himself, Boucher said, “He's now a civilian president.”

Nawaz Sharif and much of the Pakistani press have called on Musharraf to step down, but he is vowing to remain as president. He has also declared that any attempt by parliament to restore the 60-odd Supreme and Superior Court judges he purged last November under his martial law regime would be illegal.

In a move patently designed to put pressure on Zardari, the Pakistan government this week officially urged the Swiss courts to expedite a 10-year-old corruption case against the PPP leader. Zardari, who is notorious for having extracted kickbacks on government contracts during his wife's second term as prime ministers, is alleged to have \$55 million US in kickbacks ferreted away in a Swiss bank account.

At their joint press conference Thursday, Zardari and Sharif did not categorically commit to moving against Musharraf by impeaching him for his repeated violations of the constitution or by seeking to restore the purged justices. They said these matters would be decided by the incoming parliament.

Sharif said that “in principle there is no disagreement [between the two parties] on the restoration of judiciary. We will work out the modalities in the parliament.” But this left begging the question as to

whether all judgments made by the justices installed by Musharraf, including their ruling that his election as president last October was constitutional, will be declared null and void.

Sharif said bluntly that Musharraf should resign. But the media noted that Zardari's position was far less categorical. He merely said the "mandate of the people is clear."

Unquestionably, there is great popular pressure for the incoming government to act against Musharraf. On Thursday and again Friday, lawyers staged demonstrations demanding the reinstatement of the purged judges. In several cities these protests were attacked by security forces.

With an eye to Washington, the PPP leadership has never excluded the possibility of working with Musharraf. But PPP leaders have conceded that Sharif's more muscular anti-Musharraf stance was a major factor in the PML (N)'s strong showing in the Punjab in Monday's elections.

Zardari and Sharif did say that they want the pre-October 1999 constitution restored.

Musharraf rewrote the constitution to increase the powers of the president and give the military, his principal bulwark of support, a permanent and decisive say in the shaping of government policy through a military-dominated National Security Council (patterned after that in Turkey). The president's powers include the right to sack the prime minister and dissolve parliament. He is also officially the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

Asked if pro-Musharraf elements would be included in the PPP-led government of "national consensus," Zardari said, "There is no pro-Musharraf group or political party in the country."

But Sharif, in an attempt to strengthen his hand in negotiations with the PPP, is said to be urging persons elected as members the PML (Q) to defect to his party. In the case of many, this would constitute returning to the fold, since the PML (Q) was formed principally from members of Sharif's party who threw in their lot with Musharraf after his 1999 coup.

Zardari and Sharif were, if anything, even less clear about how they intend to deal with the crisis now wracking the economy, which in recent months has taken the form of spiraling food prices and flour and electricity shortages. It is common knowledge in elite circles that the new government will have to take unpopular measures, including sharply raising the price of oil-based products.

If neither the PPP nor PML (N) said much about their economic plans during the election, it is because they agree with the neo-liberal orientation of the Musharraf regime.

One of the few concrete things the two parties have agreed on is to call on the UN to investigate Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

Conceding that there are many contentious issues that separate the PPP and PML (N), an aide to Zardari said that the two parties recognize protracted negotiations will be necessary "to deal with nuts and bolts on ways to reconcile Nawaz Sharif's position with our views."

The Bhutto and Sharif families and their respective parties have long been bitter political enemies. During the 1990s, Sharif, who began his political career as a protégé of the military dictator General Zia ul-Haq, twice worked in tandem with the military and government bureaucracy to unseat Benazir Bhutto as prime minister.

Bhutto, for her part, initially welcomed Musharraf's coup against Sharif. Last year she broke an alliance with Sharif and his PML (N) in preparation for striking a deal with the dictator Musharraf.

And while the two parties now talk about jointly leading a crusade

for democracy, they both defend the grossly unequal capitalist social order that it is at the root of Pakistan's stillborn democracy. The Bhuttos are themselves one of the great landlord families of Sind, while Sharif is the scion of wealthy industrialists.

When they formed the government in the past, both the PML (N) and the PPP sustained Pakistan's decades-long military-security alliance with Washington and neither is willing to challenge it now.

Sharif no doubt garnered votes by attacking the US during the election campaign for its steadfast support for Musharraf. But only last November in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece, he proclaimed the US to be Pakistan's "natural ally."

If the US is clutching to the beleaguered Musharraf, it is above all to guarantee the Pakistani officer corps—which is anxious to maintain both its position at the center of Pakistan's government and its extensive wealth—that it continues to view it as the pivot of the US-Pakistani relationship.

To underscore the importance of the Pakistani military to Washington's geo-political interests and ambitions in Central Asia and the Middle East, the Bush administration has leaked information in recent days concerning military-intelligence operations in Pakistan. According to US government sources, the Pakistani military and its US military intelligence advisors were about to launch a major offensive against pro-Taliban elements in the Pashtun-speaking tribal and Afghan border areas of Pakistan.

Most significant was an article in yesterday's *New York Times* that publicly revealed for the first time that the CIA is operating a quasi-military base inside Pakistan. According to the *Times* report, the CIA recently obtained the Pakistani president's go-ahead to mount strikes at suspected Islamic insurgents within Pakistan: "Among other things, the new arrangements allowed an increase in the number and scope of patrols and strikes by armed Predator surveillance aircraft launched from a secret base in Pakistan—a far more aggressive strategy to attack Al Qaeda and the Taliban than had existed before."

Although the *Times* report made no mention of it, such a CIA base would likely also be used as a staging area for US activity against Pakistan's western neighbor, Iran.



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