



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

The Significance of the Elections in Pakistan

Hekmat Karzai

27 February 2008

Pakistan held its parliamentary elections in a transparent manner. While these elections are a milestone for the country, it will have serious implications on Pakistan, the region and the international community.

ON 18 FEBRUARY, the people of Pakistan went to the polls to elect a new government despite fear of violence and questions whether their votes would count. Many were skeptical about the outcome since there were several reports that the elections would be rigged to favor President Pervez Musharraf and his allies and terrorists bombed election rallies.

Other than some minor disturbances, however, the elections were relatively peaceful and, for the most part, transparent. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), once led by the charismatic Benazir Bhutto and now by her husband Asif Ali Zardari, and the Pakistan Muslim League (N) led by the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, won a significant number of the seats. President Musharraf's supporters came a distant third and accepted defeat.

Prelude to the Elections

In the last few years, violence and suicide attacks have not only taken place in North Western Frontier Province (NWFP), bordering Afghanistan, but also in the capital Islamabad and Rawalpindi, where the military General Headquarters resides. Extremism, which was earlier confined to the tribal areas, spread to urban centres.

Five major events -- all of which have taken place in the last year -- dealt a severe blow to President Musharraf's popularity: the dismissal of the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry; the siege of the Red Mosque in the capital Islamabad where hundreds were killed; full-fledged battle with the extremists in Swat after they overran several security posts; the imposition of a state of emergency; and the assassination of Benazir.

Broader Implications

The parliamentary election was a key milestone in Pakistan. The people of Pakistan voted in a transparent manner and demonstrated that they wanted a change. The next government that will take office will have a clear democratic mandate to bring about that change. Most crucially, the new government must govern effectively to avoid the fate of previous civilian governments, which were brought down due to charges of wide-spread corruption.

Clearly, the election in Pakistan proved that civil society in Pakistan is responsible and strong. It has rejected the forces of extremism and militancy and instead voted for individuals and parties that are moderate and committed to change.

The Pakistani Army should be also commended by remaining neutral in this election, unlike in the last parliamentary election where they supported the Musharraf government policy of weakening the major moderate parties and favouring the conservatives. The Army's position in this election signifies a major step towards de-politicisation of the army.

The most important implication of the elections is that the Pashtuns living in Pakistan have supported moderation and secularism rather than extremism. In many aspects, particularly in the Western media, Pashtuns were wrongly associated with the Taliban and other radical elements. But this election has proved that Pashtuns, when given the choice, will chose moderation over extremism.

The Awami National Party (ANP), the main Pashtun secularist party, has ousted from power the Islamist parties of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in NWFP and will send 10 representatives to the National Assembly.

The ANP has roots in the teachings of Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan, one of the greatest Pashtun political and spiritual leaders of the 20th century. Ghafar Khan, also known as Bacha Khan, was a close companion of Mahatma Gandhi during the movement for independence and dedicated his life to the struggle of the Pashtuns through non-violence. His principles guide the ANP, which was founded by his son, Khan Wali Khan, and is now led by his grandson, Asfandiar Wali Khan.

Way Forward

After intense negotiations, the PPP and PML (N) have agreed to form a coalition government. Some in this coalition will push for the impeachment of President Musharraf. However, for the sake of stability and the sake of Pakistan, both the coalition government and President Musharraf must work together to save their country from terrorism and extremism. President Musharraf, for his part, must be given credit for holding transparent elections and not meddling in the process.

After years of dictatorship, the people of Pakistan chose democracy and moderation. The new government is expected to challenge the extremists for its own survival. The war against terrorism has now assumed more domestic significance than ever before.

Hekmat Karzai is Director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) in Kabul, Afghanistan. He graduated with a M.Sc in Strategic Studies from the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), Nanyang Technological University. He served as a RMS Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Political Violence and Terrorism Research, and was also a Fellow at the Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service at the Georgetown University. He previously also served as First Secretary of the Afghanistan embassy in Washington.