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Pakistan's 2013 Elections: A Milestone, but Fragile Democracy

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The May 2013 election is going to be a milestone in Pakistan's political and constitutional history. It will decide the direction of Pakistan's political system – whether towards enduring democracy or continued instability.

Commentary

THE RETURN of Pervez Musharraf to Pakistan at the risk to his own life has brought attention to the upcoming national elections, which the former president is determined to contest as saviour of the nation despite his unpopularity. Indeed, the 11 May 2013 elections will be a milestone in Pakistan's constitutional history after having passed an important political moment on 16 March 2013 when both the civilian government and parliament completed a full five- year term in office (2008-13).

Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has seen three periods of martial law, extra-constitutional dismissals of civilian governments and troubled civil-military relations and perpetual political instability. The coming elections signify that despite various challenges, the country's democratic process is maturing. The peaceful transfer of power from one civilian government to another will further strengthen the fragile parliamentary system.

Significance of 2013 elections

However this is a hollow achievement. There is public resentment with the outgoing PPP-led government's failure to revive a slowing economy, curb the endemic corruption in government institutions and overcome persistent electricity breakdowns (up to 18 hours a day at the peak of summer). With a modest GDP growth of 3.7% Pakistan is the weakest South Asian economy. At the same time the volatile security situation stemming from the government's failure to rein in sectarian strife and the Taliban militant groups wins few plaudits from the Pakistanis.

The May 2013 polls are the most crucial in Pakistan after the 1970 elections, which led to dismemberment of the country's eastern wing and the creation of Bangladesh. These elections will decide the direction of Pakistan's future political trajectory and will be the first opportunity for the electorate to replace or retain a civilian government.

In the last few years Pakistan's political system has become a heavily contested domain. Unlike the last two elections, a wide array of political actors is contesting the May 2013 elections. They include the Baloch

nationalist political parties, cricketer-turned politician Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (Party of Justice, PTI) and the right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which boycotted the 2008 elections.

Moreover, the All Pakistan Muslim League (APML) of former military ruler Pervez Musharraf has also announced its intention to run in the upcoming elections. Musharraf returned to Pakistan on 24 March to officially start his election campaign. At the same time Imran Khan's impressive political gathering in Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab, on 23 March has set the alarm bells ringing for the two mainstream political parties the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of the Bhutto family and the Pakistan Muslim League led by former premier Nawaz Sharif (PML-N).

Issues in the May 2013 elections

Unlike the two preceding elections in 2002 and 2008, the May 2013 elections will see issues that are more pressing and relate to the domestic economy. Political parties will have to offer more nuanced and policy-oriented election manifestos to win over the electorate, instead of lofty rhetoric.

The 2002 elections were held a year after the 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan. They were heavily centered on the anti-US sentiments and voted to power a six-party religious alliance, the Mutahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhawa (KP) and southwestern Balochistan provinces. The pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q) formed the government winning majority seats in the key provinces of Punjab and Sindh. The PPP and PML-N did poorly in 2002 because their top leaderships were in exile and elections were heavily rigged in favour of pro-Musharraf political forces.

Meanwhile the 2008 elections which catapulted the PPP and PML-N into dominant positions were contested on three major issues: the Red Mosque Operation in Islamabad (July 2007), restoration of Pakistan's superior court judges deposed by Musharraf (March 2007) and the assassination of the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (December 2007). In the 2008 elections the PPP greatly benefited from the sympathy vote for Benazir in Sindh. Meanwhile in the urban Punjab the PML-N exploited the anti-Musharraf sentiments aroused by his decision to conduct a military operation in the Red Mosque and the dismissal of the superior judiciary judges.

Three-way contest

Traditionally, the PPP and PML-N have dominated electoral politics in Pakistan. The PPP has always enjoyed popular support in Sindh and rural Punjab. Meanwhile, the urban Punjab has been the hub of PML-N. The outcomes of elections in Balochistan and KP have been varied.

The rise of PTI as a third major political force on Pakistan's political landscape has made the electoral environment more competitive. Notwithstanding a 6% decrease its public ratings in the last six months; PTI is still the second most popular political party in Pakistan after PML-N, according to US-based International Republican Institute (IRI) survey. The 2013 elections will be a three-way contest unlike the two-way fights between the PPP and PML-N in the past. The urban, upper middle class supports PTI in Punjab and KP.

The overwhelming number of young voters can be a game changer in the 2013 elections. Out of an electoral list of 83 million, 47 percent of registered voters are between the age of 18 and 35—approximately 39 million people. According to the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) out of these 39 million around 30 million are newly listed in the electoral rolls. These 30 million voters included people who turned 18 in the last three years and did not have national identity cards until now or had identity cards but were not registered in the voting list.

Faced with a plethora of internal and external challenges a peaceful transition of power through free and fair elections is essential for strengthening the democratic institutions in Pakistan. The election process will carry the political debate forward from the 'restoration and survival of the political system' to a 'performance based accountable system.

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