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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Pakistan's May 2013 Parliamentary Elections: The Threat of Disruption**

By Arshad Ali

### **Synopsis**

*The terrorist threat to the upcoming parliamentary elections is real and the militants have the capability to derail the political process. The government needs to ensure full security and conduct the election on time.*

### **Commentary**

HOME-GROWN terrorism by Islamist militant, sectarian and separatist groups pose a key threat to the parliamentary elections in Pakistan scheduled on 11 May 2013. For instance, the umbrella group of the Pakistani Taliban, Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has called for a boycott of the elections, describing them as 'un-Islamic'.

TTP has also warned the public to stay away from the candidates and rallies of secular political parties such as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and Awami National Party (ANP). This means that the Taliban has drawn a line between the secular liberal political forces and conservative right-wing political parties. Top national political leaders are also under death threats from the militants. This has a negative impact on these political parties and limits their election campaigns to avoid deadly attacks.

### **Threat to secular political parties**

The ANP, a secular ethnic Pashtun nationalist party, has decided that the party chief Asfandiyar Wali Khan will not be leading its election campaign due to the threat to his life. The party has also decided not to arrange big rallies and large public gatherings which will naturally affect its election campaign. Similarly, the PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto will not lead his party's election campaign. In this critical situation, General (Retired) Pervez Musharraf, former President of Pakistan, came back after four years of self-imposed exile to contest the elections under his political faction, the All Pakistan Muslim League. The security threat has increased after his arrival as the TTP has sent a video-taped message that they have prepared a special death squad to kill Musharraf.

More importantly, the Pakistani Taliban has reportedly prepared "200 suicide bombers" to disrupt the political process and weaken the state. Subsequently, free and fair elections with high participation by the people seem to be a tough milestone as the turnout in the past elections has been less than 50 percent.

Since March 2013, assassination and terrorist attacks have continued on political leaders and public gatherings

in various parts of the country. The Taliban has targeted the ANP candidates and rallies in various parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. On 16 April 2013 a senior leader of the Awami National Party (ANP) survived a TTP suicide attack in Peshawar, the provincial capital of KP.

Similarly, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Provincial President Sardar Sanaulah Zehri narrowly escaped a bomb attack in Khuzdar district of Balochistan in which his son, brother and nephew were killed. The MQM candidate for the upcoming elections was also killed by the TTP in Hyderabad district of Sindh.

### **Security situation**

The security situation has already deteriorated in KP province and the adjacent Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It has a severe impact on the election campaign of secular political parties as they are restricted in their movements. The government has also declared at least 6,000 of the 9,000 polling stations vulnerable to the militants' attacks in the KP province and a majority of the polling stations in FATA.

The provincial government would request the centre to return about 45 platoons of the paramilitary Frontier Constabulary (FC) for deployment in the sensitive regions during the election. More specifically, the military has started operation in Khyber Agency to ensure the security in Peshawar, the KP's provincial capital, as the militants often launch attacks in Peshawar and flee to the regions.

The security situation in the port-city of Karachi has also been very grim. For instance, the Pashtun-dominated localities have become apparently "no-go areas" due to the presence of Taliban. The ANP maintains a strong political presence in these areas. However, the ANP cannot run its election campaign and TTP has closed its 35 party offices in these areas. Subsequently, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal (JUI-F), a religious political party, seems to be an indirect beneficiary of the ANP's inability to conduct its election campaign in these regions. However, the paramilitary rangers have started operations against militants in Karachi to eliminate them before the election.

Similarly, Balochistan is facing a security threat from ethno-separatists and sectarian outfits. The banned outfit Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and other militant groups have threatened to target the election campaign and urged the people to boycott the polls in Balochistan. The Interior Ministry has warned of massive terrorists' attacks during the election. Many of the polling stations in Balochistan have also been declared vulnerable to attacks from both sectarian and Baloch separatist groups.

The terrorist threat will limit the movements of the political parties to reach out to the people in their constituencies due to fear of threats to their lives. For instance, both the candidates and voters of secular-leaning parties will face problems in areas such as FATA and parts of KP, Balochistan, Punjab and Karachi. This will provide further opportunities to the right wing conservative and religious political forces to extend their political presence and support in these areas.

Some analysts believe that the situation is becoming more like the 2002 elections, when General Musharraf forced the main political leaders into exile, creating a conducive environment for the religious political parties that eventually formed the government in KP and Balochistan.

### **Way forward**

Despite the security threats, the elections should be held as scheduled in Pakistan. This will be the first democratic transition of power in the history of the country. The 2008 general election was held on time despite the fragile security situation. The elections helped the country to avoid instability and chaos.

If the Afghan government could arrange elections in a war-torn environment then Pakistan has every capability to conduct the elections. Any delay in the 11 May elections will mean surrendering to the militants that will further disrupt the security situation.

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