



# Pakistan on the eve of a vote – and change

by Gerald Stang

Pakistani politics rarely wants for intrigue or, unfortunately, blood. Last week's murder of Chaudhry Zulfiqar Ali, the chief prosecutor investigating the 2007 assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, is just the latest atrocity to strike Pakistan's bloodiest election campaign in years. Though Ali's murder may not have been related to the Bhutto assassination (he was also prosecuting seven members of the banned terrorist organisation, Lashkar-e-Taiba, over their alleged role in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks), the timing of the murder, just before the May 11 parliamentary elections, is bound to cause intense political speculation.

Those responsible for Bhutto's assassination have never been charged, though both Western and Pakistani intelligence have fingered the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or Pakistani Taliban. The president at the time of Bhutto's assassination - General Pervez Musharraf, himself targeted by extremist militants multiple times during his nine-year dictatorship - was charged in absentia in 2011 for allegedly facilitating the attack. To complicate the situation further, Musharraf returned from his self-imposed exile this spring with the intention of running for parliament. Surprisingly, his candidacy was declared inadmissible and he is now under arrest and facing a string of serious charges.

This reversal of fortune for the one-time dictator is just one indicator of how uncertain the exercise of power has become in Pakistan as the country adapts to recent changes in its political institutions and the make-up of the electorate.

## Battling over a changing electorate

Pakistani politics has long been described as feudal and patronage-based, with real power being wielded by a small group of families at the centre of the country's economic and political life. Change may be coming, however. Due to the rapidly expanding population (fertility rates have fallen slowly and the average remains above 3.5 children per women), the government is facing immense challenges in providing sufficient jobs, homes and infrastructure. It is also facing an increasingly literate and urban electorate. Estimates indicate that more new voters have been added to the electoral register for this election (40 million) than voted in the 2008 election (35 million). Older generations of Pakistanis were influenced by the turbulent events surrounding the 1947 partition from India and the 1971 war which saw the loss of then East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. Relations with India remain a major issue for most Pakistanis, but this year's campaign has been notable for the relative absence of rhetoric over the divided state of Kashmir. Younger voters have been raised in an environment in which the potential threat from India may have less political salience than anger at American interference, the lack of jobs and electricity, and the rise of domestic extremism. After years of focusing on external threats, Pakistanis have become increasingly concerned about extremist militancy inside Pakistan - an issue that has long worried Europe and America.

The expansion of domestic extremism to previously unaffected areas in the last five years has damaged



support for the government. The biggest issue of the 2013 election has been the attacks launched by the Pakistani Taliban against the outgoing government coalition, especially the Pakistani People's Party (PPP) of President Asif Ali Zardari, the widower and political successor of Benazir Bhutto. The attacks have forced the PPP and its allies to cancel rallies and limit campaign activities, opening up extra campaign space for opponents who are seen as less secular and less willing to denounce the Pakistani Taliban. These include the Pakistani Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), led by two-time former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and the party of upstart former cricketer Imran Khan, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Khan's rise to prominence has been driven by his ability to attract new voters, the popularity of his anti-Americanism, and his denunciations of government corruption.

### Battling over the reins of power

Corruption issues have been front and centre in the public eye as the judiciary pursued long-standing corruption allegations against President Zardari. The willingness of the judiciary to investigate the highest levels of government was interpreted by some in the media as a sign that the judges posed a threat to democracy, perhaps working in cooperation with the military. The Supreme Court of Pakistan, however, has also had well-publicised disagreements with the military, particularly during General Musharraf's years in power, so it is difficult to assign the court's pursuit of Zardari as a sign of opposition to civilian rule.

Since the ousting of General Musharraf in 2008, the military leadership has expressed its preference for continued civilian rule. While most Pakistanis agree that the army seems unlikely to launch a coup any time soon, opinions differ on what form of civilian rule would be acceptable for the generals. Attempts by President Zardari in 2008-09 to commit Pakistan to 'no first use' of nuclear weapons and to establish civilian oversight of Pakistan's leading intelligence service, the ISI, were quickly rebuffed by the military. The military seems unlikely to entrust civilians with more control until the government's vision for Pakistan's security aligns with their own and they consider the government competent enough to handle security affairs in a manner that protects the military's budget, prestige and privileges.

Following initial efforts to impose its will on the military, Zardari's PPP government spent most of the last five years in crisis mode. Zardari gained power just as the global economic slump arrived and soon after the formation of the Pakistani Taliban. Despite failures on multiple fronts, the government managed to pass (with support from the main opposition parties) the 18th constitutional amendment reducing the powers

of the presidency and devolving power from the central government to the provinces. This change will have a significant impact on how politics is practiced.

Zardari's PPP government has also been confronted with an expanding array of media voices willing to expose government corruption. As with the actions of the judiciary, the paranoid (and not so paranoid) among Pakistan watchers have been quick to see the hand of the military behind the strongest anti-PPP voices in the media. While many media outlets are indeed overtly politicised, the presence of a growing number of voices in the public sphere has meant that no one viewpoint can any longer dominate the political discussion. The increasing pluralism of the media better reflects the rich diversity of Pakistan's many ethnicities, languages, classes, regions - and strains of Islam.

### Taking a long(er) view

Pakistani leaders have long struggled to build a common narrative for the country and a state with a strong central core. But these efforts have resulted in a brittle central edifice which has excluded too many citizens from participation in political life. With a changing electorate and a new institutional balance of power, Pakistan has the opportunity to establish a new political narrative that builds on the country's pluralism. There will be no miracle cure for Pakistan's domestic challenges or the security problems they generate for the region. This month's elections, and the next set of elections five years from now (and those five years after that), will be important indicators of Pakistan's improving capacity to build a secure political order for its citizens.

For Pakistan's international partners in Europe and the United States, who remain worried about the chaos of Afghanistan and the potential for the region to serve as a base for terrorist groups, the watchword for the region has long been 'stability'. It may be time to accept a new watchword: 'patience'. Following the 2014 withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, the West may have less direct exposure to the turbulence of the region but will see no reduction in its strategic interests there. Pakistan has become so affected by the blowback from the Afghan war that the resolution of each country's domestic challenges is fully tied to the problems of the other. This means that international support and civilian engagement with both Pakistan and Afghanistan, making appropriate use of the lessons learned over the last decade, will still be required for many years to come.

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