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Conflict or Consensus: Pakistan's Political Path

1. Background Details:

Many Pakistani political observers are of the opinion that on February 18 Pakistani voters voted against President Musharraf, his political supporters and previous government's inability to provide the masses with a sense of national cohesion in addition to acting as "stooges of the US" in the 'War on Terror'. The voters' turn-out proved the craving for the change in the Pakistani voters via a democratic process and, as a result, for the first time in the history of Pakistan, the ballot box was used instead of palace intrigues or the army rule to voting out a government. These elections could be declared as one of the most dramatic elections of South Asia, if not the world, and there were strong signals between the leading political leaders of an understanding to work together. This understanding was frequently exhibited by both the main opposition parties, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). PPP's leader, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in a suicide mission on December 27, 2008 while the same day earlier during the day, Nawaz Sharif's rally was fired at that cost the lives of seven of his political workers. Both the leaders and the parties were allies against Musharraf while they were also competing the elections against each other, mainly in Punjab and generally all over the country. Strangely, the tragedy of both the parties brought them together against a common political enemy: President Musharraf and his political allies.

Since the elections, both parties have demonstrated a certain sense of political sensitivity and maturity in terms of handling the political intricacies of parliamentary democracy. From their varying degrees of conviction on different political issues to the distribution of the ministerial portfolios in Punjab, the largest province of Pakistan and in the Federal Government, both sides have attracted a favorable appreciation from their voters and critics alike. The political craftsmanship of PPP's co-chairperson, Asif Ali Zardari, also the husband of assassinated PPP leader, has astonished many of his critics and political observers who still had his past fresh in their minds – and writings. His political dexterity in taking all the main parliamentary groups including Awami National Party, a Pashtoon nationalist party, and Jamiat-e-Ulma-e-Islam (Fazal), a quasi-religio-political party that operates on the ethnic, religious and nationalist lines of Pashtoons in NWFP and Balochistan. By the mid of April 2008, the coalition has given strong chances of political maturity and have succeeded to keeping their differences firmly contained despite their differences on many issues from the restoration of the deposed judiciary to the parliamentary action against President Musharraf and rethinking the policy about War on Terror both in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and support to coalition forces in Afghanistan.

According to a recent public opinion survey, a majority of the Pakistani voters (nearly 67%) had a high level of expectation that the coalition government will deliver this time.

2. Situational Analysis:

Another important political force is Mutihidda Qaumi Movement (MQM) that has a strong support of the Mohajirs, an ethnic group concentrated in Karachi, Pakistan's port city and industrial hub. PPP has managed to bag a simple majority in the Sindh provincial assembly but MQM is a force that represents the two major urban centers of the province: Karachi and Hyderabad and is taken to be a force representing the low-middle class working and professional voters. Both PPP and MQM have been given overtures of reconciliation and willingness to proceed further on building a bigger national reconciliation on issues of mutual interest. The second largest political party in Pakistan, PML-N, has serious reservations on getting MQM on the political board because of their previous experience in the 90s of working with MQM but they permitted the PPP to proceed to forming a political coalition at the provincial level. PPP's leader visited MQM's headquarter in Karachi and in turn, MQM's delegation visited the burial places of the Bhutto family where Benazir Bhutto and her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, are buried.

These gestures could not prolong especially when the rioting broke out in Karachi on April 9 that claimed the lives of 12 people out of which 7 were burnt alive. This happened the next day after the lawyers in Lahore reportedly manhandled the former Federal Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, Dr. Sher Afgan

Niazi. Pro-Musharraf political forces were quick to blame the lawyers leaders and the political parties who had won the majority while the lawyers leaders refused to accept that their community had manhandled the former minister. After the rioting the next day, President Musharraf, before going to his official trip to China, linked the rioting with what had happened with his prime supporter, Dr. Niazi in Lahore. A new crop of no-trust had grown between PPP and the MQM that both parties are trying to destroy. The other parties in the federal coalition have kept quiet and have not commented on the state of affairs between the PPP and MQM. It is expected that both the parties will be able to recreate the atmosphere of goodwill and the effort of rapprochement will succeed.

Both the PPP and PML-N have yet to handle, discuss and resolve the critical issues like the restoration of the judiciary, deposed judges, parliamentary action against President Musharraf along with handling the country's domestic situation that has worsened by the day because of the energy shortage, price hike, deteriorated law and order situation and growing public dissent and anger. The country is facing both the domestic and foreign challenges and cannot in fact pull through without the continuity of a political reconciliation. Till now, as it is noted earlier, the atmosphere of the political amity and understanding has attracted much appreciation but this period, as it is called the political honeymoon period, is about to end and then the government would be pitched against the burning issues of various kind.

Till now, the atmosphere of political understanding between the three major political parties i.e. PPP, PML-N and ANP, is stable and all sides agree on the policy actions regarding various issues from FATA, situation in Afghanistan, handling of the Balochistan crisis, law and order and reconstructing both the constitutional and administrative institutions. The political maturity has till now been reflected in almost all the actions and statements of the coalition and political observers and workers alike expect a result oriented performance from the new Pakistani government. It looks that the first time in the history of Pakistan, the political forces have chosen the way of consensus over the way of conflict.

3. Recommendations of CRSS:

Keeping in view the challenges that Pakistan is facing, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. The process of political reconciliation must continue with the consensus of all the major and minor political parties inside as well as outside the parliament.
2. The new Pakistani government must work hard--and creatively--to resolve the growing resentment against the crises both internally and externally.
3. Pakistani establishment should review the policy on the 'War on Terror' and should come up with a "domestic solution" instead of a dictated foreign agenda that has failed to produce any commendable results.
4. The coalition must ensure the supremacy of the parliament so that parliamentary institutions are strengthened for the "trickledown effect" of the strength to various other constitutional and executive institutions.
5. The coalition government must continue to act as a unified and united political force to handle all political matters politically.
6. New government must formulate public-oriented policies on sensitive issues like price hike, energy shortage and law and order so that it gets a bigger breathing space to concentrate and focus on more important geo-political issues.