

General Elections 2008 and the Crisis of Credibility

1. Background Details:

President Musharraf's government seems to be on the road to become one of the most controversial of governments Pakistan has ever had. The National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB), a brainchild of the government, with the aim of politically empowering the grassroots in Pakistan's politics dismantled the centuries old Commissionerate-system bringing the civilian bureaucracy at the district level under the politically elected District Mayors. The Musharraf Administration introduced the Political Parties Order in 2002 that changed the policing system. A large chunk of Pakistani public opinion now believes that political and administrative amendments brought in by the President were really aimed at securing his own office. His critics claim that during the PML-Q government from 2002-07, President Musharraf failed to act as a head of the state and rather acted as the *de facto* chief of PML-Q (especially by attending and addressing PML(Q)'s political rallies).

Pakistan's mainstream opposition political parties along with a predominant section of the civil society now believes that Election 2008 under Musharraf would be deeply flawed, most probably rigged, manipulated and unfair.

Political observers, media and various non-government and civil society organizations have been pointing out the political and administrative maneuverings that have already taken place. There are claims that PML-Q stands to benefit especially in the province of Punjab that has the biggest number of seats in the National Assembly, 148 out of the 272. The total number of complaints filed with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) against such manipulations is around 500 while the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Justice (r) Farooq Qazi vowed on Dec 27, 2007 to take "strict action" against the government functionaries who were playing favorites. Nearly a month after his statement, no action has been taken against any of the District Mayors. In such circumstances, it is believed that the elections will neither be fair nor free and this could push Pakistan deeper into political instability. And, odds are that the religio-political extremist elements will take advantage of such instability.

Elections were fixed for Jan 8, 2008 but the assassination of the former PM Bhutto on December 27 caused widespread violence, especially in Sindh province where many government buildings, including the regional offices of the ECP were gutted in 13 districts. But, the aggrieved Pakistan People's Party (PPP) did not call for the postponement. President Musharraf, it appears, in consultations with ECP, delayed the elections till Feb 18 2008. Media reports suggested that the ECP and the government had conducted "informal consultations" with all the political parties for this postponement as the present law and order situation did not permit to hold the elections and that ECP was unable to do quick arrangements to hold elections in the affected districts of Sindh[1]. On Jan 3, 2008, PML-N claimed that neither the government nor ECP contacted them for this postponement while PPP announced to participate in the elections "whenever they would take place." With a minor but strong part of the opposition boycotting the elections, mainstream political opposition unwilling to express confidence on elections under Musharraf and his inability

to “completely distance” himself from PML-Q has already stained with the allegations of rigging and manipulations, the upcoming elections are feared to be greatly controversial and destabilizing of suspicions of the political opposition are not addressed aptly.

2. Situational Analysis:

Newly nominated Chairman of PPP, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of PM Benazir Bhutto, explicitly expressed on Jan 9, upon his arrival in UK for his studies, that a free and fair elections will “ensure the stability of Pakistan” while a failure to hold free and fair elections could jeopardize the integrity of the state. Same concerns were showed by the US Senate’s Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Senator Joseph Lieberman during a press conference on Jan 9, 2008. Senator Lieberman warned that the “rigging will increase political polarization” and in that case, the “US Congress may take action but that would be awful.” With domestic and international pressure growing particularly on Musharraf and generally on the caretaker government and the ECP, political rumors have started to make rounds that a broad-based and a consensual “National Government” (NG) maybe formed after the elections so that the “atmosphere of political reconciliation may proceed[2].” The opposition party, PML-N called for the formation of the NG before the elections as the “caretaker government was partisan as it included legislators of the PML-Q[3].”

The assassination of Benazir Bhutto has caused the public rating of PML-Q plummet and the postponement of elections and the talk of forming the NG are suspiciously seen as an effort to provide ample breathing and political space. According to The Daily Times of Jan 14, 2008, the “PML-Q, the party that scored the highest number of seats in the National Assembly, 126, in 2002 is being given less than 50 by pollsters, the rest going to the PPP, who had 81 in 2002 and may cross 100 this time, and the PML-N.” This line in the newspaper’s editorial depicts the prevailing popular sentiment with Musharraf reportedly trying hard to keep his position secure as the President of Pakistan and vowing to work with any political party that wins the elections and forms the next government. He had already expressed his willingness to work with any political party as “he is not a trouble maker[4].” The rumors of forming a National Government and the postponement of the elections have already cast shadows of doubt on the political map of Pakistan. The opposition parties have repeatedly expressed that the elections must not be further postponed and must be held on Feb 18, 2008 in a “free and fair manner as Pakistan cannot afford controversial elections[5].” President Musharraf is reportedly on his “contact campaign” with the political opposition, mainly the PPP and PML-N and is rumored to be meeting with the PML-N’s President Mian Shahbaz Sharif in London via his old and trusted intermediary, Brig. (r) Niaz. With PPP, it is believed that the messages of political reconciliation have already been conveyed via Makhdoom Amin Faheem, Senior Vice Chairman, PPP.

3. Recommendations of CRSS:

Given the importance of the coming elections in the perspective of Pakistan’s regional and global role, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. The ECP must be made independent and free from any influence of the government.

2. The CEC must hold regular consultations with the political parties and should be administratively empowered to take action on complaints of misconduct by the government functionaries and the Government.
3. The Government of Pakistan must ensure complete administrative support to ECP to ensure free and fair elections and also completely facilitate the international observer missions with free access all across the country.
4. The Government of Pakistan must ensure the maintenance of law and order and security where every political party should have the freedom to operate before and on the Election Day.
5. The Government must reverse the amendments made in the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) ordinance barring the direct coverage by the private media channels.
6. Media, non-government and civil society organizations must be given complete freedom to cover and report on the elections before and on the Election Day.

[1] Dec 30 2007: CRSS emphasized that the elections be held on Jan 8, 2008. Reference:

<http://www.crss.pk/Assassination%20of%20Benazir%20Bhutto,%20Former%20Prime%20Minister%20of%20Pakistan.pdf>

[2] Chaudhary Shujaat, President PML-Q quoted in media on Jan 11, 2008.

[3] Shahbaz Sharif, President, PML-N quoted in media on Jan 14, 2008.

[4] Interview with Al-Jazeera English on Dec 12, 2007.

[5] Ahsan Iqbal, Secretary Information, PML-N quoted in media on Jan 19, 2008.