

Pakistan Elections 2013 – Will They Really Make A Difference?

by
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The bottom line first: the elections scheduled for May 11 will not be a game changer. In the initial period Pakistan is likely to see a somewhat more efficient and less corrupt government, improved tax collection, and hopefully a tad less extremist violence as well. This will come as a relief to Pakistanis terrorized by daily bomb blasts and killings, and fed up of five years of serious misgovernance. But shortly thereafter it will be business as usual. "Shortly" could mean six months, or a year. Longer is unlikely.

I am basing this prediction on the assumption that a country's politics reflects the underlying social relations between its communities and the distribution of economic power. But nothing indicates that these fundamentals are about to change. Instead this election is surely just another round of musical chairs as various players jockey for personal power. Unlike the 1970's election campaign of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – who had made grand promises for land reform and redistribution of wealth that he never intended to fulfill – this time around such change is not even on the agenda. Imran Khan's vow to eliminate corruption in 90 days is typical of the shallow promises being made all around. No effort to create a more open and tolerant society is visible.

Pakistan's religious minorities have little reason to celebrate the elections. Several Islamic extremists are candidates themselves, and the mainstream secular parties have campaigned with radicals to garner their votes. The lack of public outrage against the Pakistani Taliban, who are openly taking credit for murdering whoever they deem secular or liberal, is worrying. There is scarcely any public comment as they continue to blow up schools, and kill polio workers and teachers. The state stands as a silent spectator to the daily murder of its citizens just because their particular variant of Islam is not that of the majority. Shia neighborhoods have been devastated by suicide attacks, and men identified by Shia names like Abbas and Jafri have been dragged out from buses and executed Gestapo style. The police remain unconcerned when Ahmadis are murdered, or have their graveyards dug up and desecrated openly by the local powers-that-be. Although Sind was traditionally much more tolerant than Punjab, Hindus have fled Sind en masse.

Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif have openly pandered to the extremists and so, unsurprisingly, their respective parties have been spared the dreadful attacks made on public rallies held by parties labeled as secular – the ANP, MQM, and PPP. Imran Khan gives the Taliban a boost by providing them with ideological space. He explains away their terrorism as an inevitable response to the US invasion of Afghanistan. Nawaz Sharif hosts active and well known Shia killers in his party. One wonders if the targeting of Shias, Hindus, and Ahmadis will stop after the elections. Or if the frequent abduction, torture, and killing of Baluch nationalists will cease. If this happens, then surely Pakistan will have gained much. Though unlikely, one hopes for the best.

Will the elections be reasonably free and fair? "Reasonably", of course, involves a subjective assessment. In some parts of KPK women have been forbidden to vote by the men; Sindhi serfs are being directed to vote for their masters; Ahmadis have been denied their right to vote since 1977; and elsewhere extreme physical violence has been unleashed against political opponents. Two days before May 11, the son of ex-prime minister Raza Gilani was abducted and his entourage attacked by gunmen who left a trail of blood. Moreover, the Election Commission of Pakistan has totally failed to limit campaigning expenditure for candidates to the National Assembly. Officially the limit stands at Rs 1.5 million per candidate, but some have already spent a hundred times more. For all these flaws, the overall enthusiasm for elections and the vigorous campaigning suggests that the elections will largely reflect popular opinion.

Predictions: the PPP will be seriously weakened because of its dismal performance, but will cling on to at least a third or half of its present seats in the assembly. While the PMLN is likely to win

nationally by a small margin, it will be challenged strongly by Imran Khan's PTI, the new insurgent. His accidental fall from the stage and subsequent injury will surely help his party's position. Still, no party will have a clear majority. So we shall see a coalition government having all the weaknesses of such arrangements. Moreover this elected government will be competing for power against the military, judicial, and religious establishments. Each has carved out its own power domain and jealously protects it. No significant change can be expected in relations with India or Afghanistan, but the new government is likely to take a harder line against the US.

Is there anything positive to be said about the elections? Yes! For the very first time an elected government in Pakistan has been able to complete its 5-year tenure and will peacefully hand over power to an elected successor regime. Chastened by revelations of past ISI involvement in domestic politics, and weakened by fighting multiple insurgencies, the army is presently in no mood of disrupting the political process. Except for Baluchistan, where nationalist parties continue to be targeted by the security forces, this time the military has chosen to watch from the shadows and appears to have no obvious favorites. All in all, Pakistan will have moved forward – but only by an inch.

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