

Pakistan Portents (Editorial)

Brief Summary: The Pakistan People's Party, under the leadership of Benazir Bhutto, won a plurality in the Oct 1993 elections. Bhutto will now attempt to form a coalition government. Pakistan is finding that fundamentalist party powers decrease as democracy increases.

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Benazir Bhutto, whose Pakistan People's Party (P.P.P.) won a plurality but not a majority in parliamentary elections here last week, will return as the country's Prime Minister if her efforts to patch together a coalition succeed. But the vote was notable mostly for what it said about the losers, and for the lessons it suggests to other Muslim countries and to policy-makers in the United States.

Any People's Party government is bound to be shaky. The party's dominance in the National Assembly and possibly in Punjab, the most populous state and home to Pakistan's politically powerful army, depends on a coalition with Islamic and conservative groups--allies given to changing sides for petty personal gains. Even in Sindh, Bhutto's home province, where the party has a clear majority, danger looms. During Bhutto's first stint as Prime Minister, strife there contributed greatly to the dissolution of her government in 1990, and old rivalries remain. The Sindhi scene is further complicated by two other Bhuttos: Cousin Mumtaz and brother Murtaza--the latter running in absentia from exile in Syria--entered the fray in opposition to their female kin, and both were elected to the Sindh assembly. In a feudal environment such as exists in the Bhutto provincial stronghold, it would be a mistake to underestimate their potential for mischief-making. (It is believed that Murtaza, who is wanted for terrorist assaults, was allowed on the ballot in order to give the bureaucratic-military establishment additional leverage over Benazir.)

Intrigue aside, there is anxiety that the politics of squabbling and horse trading, which has marked Pakistan's return to parliamentary democracy since 1988, will continue. If instability increases, the consolidation of democratic order will become difficult, perhaps impossible. Yet most observers agree that this was an important election; and for the trends it revealed, perhaps historic.

First, a two-party system is emerging. Never before, from its founding in 1967, has the P.P.P. been outpolled in a fair vote by the Muslim League, a secular party that's been either moribund or severely compromised since the 1950s.

Second, contrary to expectation, the P.P.P. lost decisively in urban areas, where the population is increasingly rapidly; and for the first time the working class, middle class and significant numbers in the intelligensia switched to the rival party. Large landowners, who shape voting patterns in rural areas, made the difference for Bhutto, whose nominations to the party's tickets have always favored them. In this election the People's Party began to look like the landlord's party, as several prominent families traditionally behind the Muslim League shifted allegiance. This assured the P.P.P. success in rural areas, but the cost of victory may be high. The Party's populist reputation is dented; a reversal of images has occurred. The conservative Muslim League, long an elite-sponsored grouping of fractious landowners, has

taken on a relatively urban, middle-class and modern look, while the P.P.P. appears wedded to the old feudal order. Bhutto's electoral alliance with a religious party has added to this impression.

In many respects, in fact, Nawaz Sharif, the Muslim League's leader, is the real winner in this election. Once a creature of Gen. Mohammed Zia ul-Haq and the intelligence service, and an opportunistic ally of Pakistan's fundamentalists, he has remade himself as a neoliberal reformist and revived the party of Pakistan's founding fathers. Above all, he has inadvertently exposed the religious parties to be like drums: loud and hollow.

Which suggests the third, and most far-reaching, trend. In a close P.P.P.-Muslim League contest, Jamaat-e-Islami, vanguard of theocratic statehood and lead party in the Pakistani Islamic Front, had expected to emerge as kingmaker. Instead, it is totally marginalized; in its first real test of electoral strength the Islamic Front was routed, polling no more than 3 percent of the vote. Religious parties outside the front fared even worse, unless they piggybacked on the P.P.P.; but these face other embarrassments, as they will have to trim their ideology to survive in coalition with a woman.

Such results indicate that, among Muslims at least, the fundamentalist alternative loses appeal in a democratic environment. In places like Pakistan under Zia and Sudan under Gen. Mohammed Jaafar el-Nimeiry, the Islamic parties gained from alliance with pro-American dictatorships. In other places--Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Afghanistan--they found legitimacy as adversaries of pro-Western or pro-Soviet dictatorships. Yet in Bangladesh, Yemen, Morocco and now Pakistan the power of fundamentalist parties recedes as democratic freedoms are partially or fully restored.

For all its talk of the Islamic threat, America cannot find satisfaction in this development. Democracy entails some exercise of popular power. Public opinion in postcolonial societies, meanwhile, does not encourage clientelism. That is the trade-off--a bad one for great powers that need clients. This is the fifth year of the restoration of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan, and the second since the United States cut off aid to this country. To most Pakistanis, these two facts are not coincidental.

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