



PAKISTAN ELECTIONS 2013: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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May 2013 elections in Pakistan have been hailed as a historic landmark in a much battered democracy. The 2013 elections are Pakistan's 10th elections since 1970 and for the first time in 66 years, peaceful transition of power from one democratically elected regime to another elected regime is taking place. Voter turnout was a robust 60 per cent, despite the pre poll violence, which reportedly claimed more than 40 lives and dissuaded candidates from three important political parties including the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

Nawaz Sharif has made an exultant return in the power structure after thirteen years. Sharif, who was humiliated, blamed for Pakistan's (verge of) economic collapse in 1999 and sent into exile to Saudi Arabia, managed to win people's trust and compete with the existing Pakistan Peoples Party and the cricketer turned politician, Imran Khan. Sharif does get some credit of not interrupting the PPP's tenure, even though, he had managed ample support during the last five years.

The much awaited elections created ample anxiety and have been discussed nationally and internationally due to number of factors which happened for the very *first time in Pakistan*. For the first time, a civilian regime completed full tenure of five years. For the first time, the transfer of political power from one civilian regime to another in a peaceful manner would take place. For the first time, there was a triangular competition with three powerful parties competing for power, breaking the traditional two party spilt between the PPP and Nawaz Sharif's PML (N)

Three parties were competing for power in the current elections – the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML (N) and the Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

The PPP swiped the previous elections primarily on account of the sympathy wave generated immediately after Benazir Bhutto's assassination and also, Pakis

had little option other than the PPP, at that point of time. Military had been in power for 9 years and Pakistan was crying to get the military dictator –Pervez Musharraf out. Musharraf was blamed for most of Pakistan's woes. Welcoming democracy was the only way to send the army back to the barracks.

In 2013 elections, PPP lost its appeal due to the bad reputation it developed for governance and economic mismanagement in the last five years. Zardari handed reigns to his inexperienced son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who is relatively new to Pakistani politics, was unable to campaign and could hardly win trust and confidence from the masses. Corruption has been seen one of the major issues crippling the economy apart from energy crisis and power shortages. There is tremendous anger in the masses due to rising prices and increasing unemployment. PPP has managed to win seats in the southern Sindh. The party has won (till now) 32 seats, although the complete results of the elections would be out by May 19th. Among the PPP kingpins who lost their seats were, Raja Pervez Ashraf, former Prime Minister, who lost against a candidate from PML (N), several ministers including, Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar and Qamar Zaman Kaira, who were defeated in Punjab.

PML (N) Nawaz Sharif emerged as the leading candidate with his support centered in the business elite and conservative right in Punjab. Punjab is the heartland of Pakistan's political process, while only about one third of Pakistan's total 180 million population resides in Punjab, half of the general category National Assembly seats are from Punjab.

A senior Pakistani journalist Nusrat Javeed said:

"Nawaz's victory says two things about Pakistan: one, the people of Pakistan prefer the comfort of status quo over the uncertainty of revolutions; and two, all

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roads to the center go through Punjab, and in Punjab, people are right-leaning and conservative,”¹

The PML (N) emerged as the single largest party in Punjab and has managed 123 out of 272 Parliamentary seats. PML (N) won majority of its seats in Punjab, 4 from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and one from Sindh. Nawaz Sharif would retain Shahbaz Sharif, his younger brother as the Chief Minister of Punjab. Shahbaz during his last tenure in Punjab implemented several development programs² and gained essential popularity.

Although, Sharif is just short of the simple majority, he has won enough seats to avoid having to form coalition with his main rivals, the PPP and the PTI. He is expected to form the government with the support of the independent candidates and smaller rightist parties like the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, which has won 10 seats in the National Assembly. Not having the support of his arch rivals in the coalition would indeed give him more stability and it might be easier for him to implement desired reforms/policies.

Imran Khan (PTI), who suffered an unfortunate accident just before the elections managed to build up support amongst the urban youth, most of them were first time voters. On April 25, 1996 Imran Khan launched his party in Lahore and boycotted the previous elections in 2008. His popularity peaked after his famous October 2011 rally in Lahore. Imran Khan kept up his youthful image but at the same time supported the ideals that fetched him support from the conservatives.³ Imran Khan’s main support block was created in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). His stance has been ‘anti-US’ and more importantly ‘anti-drone’ strikes conducted by the US and NATO troops. This went very well in KPK, as the region remains badly inflicted by the drone strikes. His promise of change and “Naya Pakistan” made him popular with the youth.

Although, the PTI have swept the board in KPK and FATA province defeating the PPP and has bagged 27 seats, is obviously not happy with the elections outcome and expected better results. Imran failed to get support from Punjab and his young supporters remained centered in the urban areas.

Fauzia Kasuri, a founding member of the party, told *Al Jazeera* that the results had not quite met expectations.

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“We had expected a better result, but consider that we have nearly 40 seats, it’s a big achievement. [Imran Khan] has created a sense of belonging and participation in people, particularly the youth and women of Pakistan. I think it’s a terrific thing for young people..... We will be sitting in opposition, and will be a good opposition. There are lots of challenges facing the country. I feel the role of the opposition is as

important as that of the government in these circumstances.”⁴

While the 2013 elections have given a nation strong sense of hope and demonstrated nations faith in democracy the elections were certainly not without loopholes.

PTI has accused PML (N) of massive rigging with the cooperation of police and polling station staff. There are reports of polling frauds and forcible takeover of some polling stations, particularly in Karachi. In fact, PTI leaders have called this the worst ever rigging and called for re-election in NA-122 and NA-125 under the army’s supervision.⁵ Imran Khan said that the party has collected evidences of rigging in atleast 25 constituencies of the National Assembly and the appealed that the Election Commission should look into the matter.⁶

Elections were not free from violence and the extremist Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) did target candidates from three political parties in order to derail the election process and to twist the outcome of the elections. The TTP described democracy as an “un-Islamic system which only serves the interests of infidels” and targeted the liberal and secular political parties – the PPP, the ANP and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). The ANP became the prime target being the Pashtun party and also it has been one of the most active voices against the Taliban. Ejaiz Haider, very rightly pointed out:

“The TTP wanted to sideline the PPP, the MQM and the ANP so that other parties are returned to parliament with big headcounts, parties that the TTP thinks are more amenable to negotiating with the group and stopping military operations against them”.⁷

Another interesting development which became a matter of discussion and was viewed as contradicting the spirit of democracy, during the process of elections, was the expulsion of the New York Times

bureau chief in Pakistan, Declan Walsh, on the eve of the elections. He received a notice on May 9th from the police officers outside his home in Islamabad. The note issued from the Interior Ministry to Walsh read:

"It is informed that your visa is hereby canceled in view of your undesirable activities," the order said. "You are therefore advised to leave the country within 72 hours."⁸

Despite repeated inquiries Walsh was not given any explanations. The Times executive editor, Jill Abraham, even filed a formal complaint seeking reinstatement of Walsh. Walsh reporting on CIA clandestine drone program did not received well with the Pakistani military. His report published in March suggested that the army "may be using the [drone] program to disguise its own operations".⁹ His sudden departure from Islamabad has been linked to his previous reporting on the drone attacks being conducted on the tribal borders.

It is not incorrect to state that Nawaz Sharif has demonstrated maturity and it appears that he has a fair sense of where the nation needs to be steered, he would invariably face numerous challenges on the domestic and international front:

Sharif is set to resume power in Punjab but he would have to carefully maneuver the his opposition and inter-provincial relationships as Imran

Khan's party will be in power in the northwestern province of KPK and the PPP has managed to gather support in Southern Sindh.

Sharif will have to reach an agreement with President Zardari who finishes his tenure as a President this year in September. Chief Justice Chaudhry is retiring in December 2013 and Sharif needs to manage his cards carefully post Chaudhry's retirement. Chief Justice Chaudhry will be succeeded by Justice Tassadque Jilani who belongs to Multan and a close relative of former Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Yusuf Gilani. The Army chief, General Kayani, finishes his tenure this year in November, adding to Nawaz's list of critical changes/developments in the next 6 months.

Sharif has been against the army coming into power and has taken an open stance against the military during the election campaign (and during his previous tenure). But the fact remains that he has little option but to work with the Army, which has never allowed the civilian interference in at least three critical security areas: Defence budget and procurements, nuclear arsenal and policy and foreign

policy specifically, in relation to India and Afghanistan. It looks like Sharif has learnt his lessons from the 1990s and would refrain from repeating similar mistakes of intervening in the military's domain. Military has dominated the security issues in Pakistan and this trend is highly unlikely to change in the near future.

On the economic front, Pakistan is going through a difficult period with a consistent low growth rate in the previous year. Fiscal deficit has been on the rise and the inflation rate went up to staggering (average) 14% in the last couple of years, before it marginally came down in 2012. Sharif will have to address the chronic corruption, frequent power cuts and weak infrastructure. Sharif favours privatization and deregulation, and is expected to follow these policies to support the economy. He has also expressed deep interest in taking a bailout from the International Monetary Fund to be able to counter balance of payment crisis.

Sharif's government faces enormous security challenge with extremism booming and insurgency flourishing at the frontier borders. The Pakistani Taliban have been a spoiler during the election campaign and have been very active with the terrorist attacks demonstrating their 'anti-state' and 'anti-US' stance. Sharif uptill now has taken a moderate stance against the Taliban and has managed his campaign relatively peacefully. It is likely that Sharif

might try to negotiate with the Taliban which would not go very well with the military as the establishment has been the prime target of the Taliban attacks in the last 5 years.

As far as effect of Sharif's takeover on Pakistan's international relations is concerned, it is too early to predict. Nawaz has been extremely supportive of increasing ties with India during his election campaign. In all likelihood, the trade between the nations and people to people contact is expected to grow. Although, India is aware that Pakistan's policy of using terror as a foreign policy tool against India cannot be altered by Sharif alone, India should go ahead with extending economic and cultural ties with Pakistan.

Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan cannot be viewed in a positive light and Afghans don't trust Pakistan's intentions anymore. Pakistan has failed to generate its goodwill within Afghanistan and India on the other hand, enjoys its soft power in Afghanistan. Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan and its desire to seek

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strategic depth in Afghanistan are not likely to change soon.

Pakistan's relationship with the US is at its worst phase at present, and there is tremendous mistrust between the two. For the first time anti-American sentiment in Pakistan surpassed anti-India sentiment.

Sharif is likely to mend ties with the Washington as he is well aware that the US economic support is critical for Pakistan's economy. Sharif intends working towards seeking bailout package from the IMF and in this context the US support does become very important. Also, till the time the US troops depart from the region (end of 2014) Sharif would certainly be in favour of having the US support.

Another significant development likely to take place with Sharif coming into power is the extension of the Saudi influence in Pakistan. Sharif has been in exile in Saudi Arabia and shares a good understanding with them. The Saudi influence on Pakistan's policies, especially, related to Afghanistan is likely to increase.

Even though Sharif's government would face numerous challenges on multiple fronts, successful completion of full tenure by the PPP and successful conduct of 2013 elections have given shreds of hope to Pakistan. The latest political developments would certainly provide stability to Islamabad with democracy gaining ground, the

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democratic institutions being able to assert themselves, and also, power of the masses being able to bring some change.

Notes

¹ "Sharif Stages comeback in landmark Pakistan election", *Reuters*, May 11, 2013, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/11/us-pakistan-election-idUSBRE9490V620130511>

² The development programs included the much talked about metro bus mass transit system in the provincial capital of Lahore that transports over 100,000 people every day.

³ Asha'arRehman, "My Name is Khan and I am the Replacement", *Dawn*, April 14, 2013, at <http://dawn.com/2013/04/14/my-name-is-khan-and-i-am-the-replacement/>

⁴ "PTI party admits election results are "disappointing" ", *ALJAZEERA*, May 12, 2013, at <http://blogs.aljazeera.com/topic/pakistan-elections/pti-party-admits-election-results-are-disappointing>

⁵ "Imran Khan alleges rigging in 25 constituencies, seeks recount," *DAWN*, May 14, 2013, at <http://dawn.com/2013/05/14/imran-alleges-rigging-in-25-constituencies-see-s-recount/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ejaiz Haider, "The spoiler called the TTP", *The Indian Express*, May 4, 2013.

⁸ Amanda Holpuch and Jon Boone "New York Times Pakistan bureau chief expelled on eve of country's election", *the guardian*, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/10/pakistan-new-york-times-declan-walsh>

⁹ Ibid.



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