

Elections 'Rigged' In Pakistan By Military Regime

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

The elections in Pakistan tomorrow are being "blatantly rigged" by the military regime, says the nation's most-respected human rights group.

The credibility of the vote will be undermined and the implications for the army and the country will be grave, it adds.

"The blatant manner in which the electoral process is being vulgarised and the will of the people mocked is extremely worrying," Afrasiab Khattak, chairman of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) told a press conference in Islamabad.

The pre-election report details the harassment of opposition candidates, intimidation by army and police officers to ensure that pro-government candidates win and criticises the long list of [amendments to the constitution made by President Pervaiz Musharraf](#) to ensure that the army continues to run the country after the elections.

Western monitors said they feared the polls were less about restoring democracy than the army's attempt to legitimise a permanent role for itself in a new political system. "We see no real transfer of power to civilians," said a European diplomat.

For the past six months Gen Musharraf's senior aides have been involved in widespread pre-election manipulation by creating a pro-army "King's party", barring two former prime ministers and dozens of their senior leaders from running and drastically amending the constitution.

"If you want to prevent a total military takeover you have to give them a share of power," Gen Musharraf said on Aug 21 after he announced the Legal Framework Order that altered the constitution and validated all the military decrees since the coup.

The elections, he said without irony, "will be a transition from a democratic dictatorship to an elected essence of democracy." I A Rehman, the director of HRCP, said: "The army is a candidate in the elections with a stake larger than that of any political party."

Many Pakistanis believe the results are likely to create greater political instability, not less. The lack of public interest in the campaign and expected low voter turnout will offer little legitimacy or credibility to the army.

Since April it has been clear that Gen Musharraf was more interested in regime survival than marching the army back to the barracks. On Apr 30 [he was the only candidate in a controversial referendum](#) that made him president for the next five years.

While the government claimed a 57 per cent voter turnout, of whom 97.5 per cent voted for Gen Musharraf, independent monitors say the turnout was between five and 15 per cent. The referendum led to a dramatic decline in his earlier popularity.

According to senior bureaucrats and politicians, a team headed by senior bureaucrats in the president's office, generals from the Inter Services Intelligence and the governors of the four provinces have worked assiduously over the past five months to ensure what the army calls "positive results". The government strongly denies there is any such team.

The regime [debarred two exiled former prime ministers](#), Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, from returning home and

then prevented dozens of their party candidates from running in the elections through a plethora of new restrictions.

Jemima Khan fears the government is trying to harm her husband Imran Khan's chances in the elections after one of his party workers was found dead in a river following his arrest by police.

The body of Jabbar Khan, 20, was found in the Indus, near Mianwali in central Punjab province, on Monday after he had spent four days in police custody. "He was a young and dedicated political worker for my husband's party," Jemima Khan said.