

## Voting Is Bad

Military rulers see the downside of democracy as the opposition does well at district elections

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

Until July 27, Maj.-Gen. Sardar Mohammed Anwar Khan was a career military man serving at army headquarters in Rawalpindi. A day later he had retired-for a new career in politics. The Muslim Conference party, which won the July 25 polls in Pakistani Kashmir, nominated Khan to become president of the autonomous region Azad Jammu and Kashmir, or AJK. To facilitate the appointment the AJK government conveniently amended a law that bars government servants from contesting elections until two years after retirement. With Gen. Pervaiz Musharraf in power as "chief executive" and self-appointed president, it is the first time in a country with a long history of military rule that both Pakistan and Pakistani Kashmir have generals as their presidents.

At least the military government can get what it wants in Kashmiri politics (the army denied charges that it manipulated Khan's election). The results of the final phase of an eight-month-long series of countrywide district elections, however, could not have pleased Musharraf. When final results of the August 8 elections were sealed, though pro-army candidates had won the most seats, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party did well. In the polls, in which publicly elected councillors chose mayors and deputy mayors, the PPP swept Sindh province and parts of Punjab.

For Musharraf, who faces an October 2002 Supreme Court deadline for the democratic election of a civilian government, the success of the PPP is a threat to continued army dominance of the political system. In an August 15 National Day speech Musharraf declared that elections to the four provincial assemblies, the national assembly and the Senate would indeed be held in early October 2002, while amendments to the constitution would be made in the three months prior to the elections. But he did not outline what formal role the military would play in a future civilian set-up, nor how he planned to validate his five-year claim to the presidency.

If the army is determined to keep Bhutto and her successor, Nawaz Sharif, out of power, it faces the same old, powerful political families it faced when it ousted Sharif in a bloodless coup in October 1999. While Musharraf has said the district elections would usher in a new system of "devolution of power to the people," his critics suggest that the people will only be given power if they support the military. The aim of the elections "is the creation of a military-friendly civilian constituency," says noted columnist Ayaz Amir. "At stake is the creation of a civilian base for the military government."

In an attempt to depoliticize the local elections, candidates were not allowed to run on party tickets. But party politics played a key role, as their party affiliations-and military loyalties-were often known. The army has built its key political support within Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League, isolating a pro-Sharif faction and winning over the larger faction, the PML-QA, or Quaid-e-Azam.

The elections showed that Musharraf can no longer ignore Bhutto's PPP. While Bhutto lives in self-imposed exile and her husband Asif Zardari serves a five-year jail sentence for corruption, her party has re-established its credentials as a secular national opposition party.

mixed fates for islamic parties

Coming third in district elections was the Jamaat-e-Islami party, which has demanded Musharraf's resignation and a new Islamic order. The party won the mayorship of Karachi, Pakistan's largest city. The PPP and the Jamaat-e-Islami, who were allied in some districts, could now forge strong political opposition to the army.

The temptation will be great for Musharraf and the army to control elections. Prior to the district polls, opposition party leaders accused army officers of exerting pressure on local councillors, who elect the nazim, or mayor, to support pro-army candidates. Since the elections the army has said it will establish "district support teams" manned by army officers to monitor the mayors. Military commanders will have the power to approve or veto development

projects.

In his speech Musharraf, expressing his disappointment that Pakistan was being called "a failed state, a terrorist state" abroad because of a worsening law and order situation, announced the banning of two Islamic parties blamed for a wave of killings in recent months, and said police would launch raids on terrorist groups. "This is the last chance to build Pakistan or ruin it and we won't let it come to ruin," he said.

Also on August 15 in Islamabad, a team from the International Monetary Fund arrived to discuss a three-year loan (Pakistan must pay \$22 billion in debt repayments by 2004). The coincidence made it clear: If the army interferes too much in the electoral process, it is economic ruin they will face.