

Pakistan Referendum

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Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

Early results from a controversial referendum on whether to extend military rule here showed the government of Gen. Pervez Musharraf winning overwhelmingly, as expected. But lax voting procedures and a surprisingly low turnout are likely to deny Mr. Musharraf the democratic legitimacy he sought when calling the referendum in March.

With 429,780 votes counted from 708 polling stations six hours after polls closed, 345,427 ballots supported extending Mr. Musharraf's term and only 9,774 were against, the Associated Press reported. The rest-17.4%-were ruled invalid. That gave Mr. Musharraf 97% support among valid votes. Final results weren't expected until today.

But urban turnout was much lower than the 30% or more the government had aimed for, partly by ordering military personnel and civil servants to participate. Hussain Naqi of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which carried out the most comprehensive independent monitoring of the polling, said voluntary participation was no more than 5% of eligible voters in Lahore, and 3% and to 5% in Karachi. There were no international monitors.

Mr. Musharraf, who seized power in 1999, beamed as he voted at a women's university in Rawalpindi, near Islamabad. "I am very confident," he told reporters. "The information that I have got is that the turnout is very good."

While most observers agree that Mr. Musharraf cannot lose the vote no matter how low the turnout, they say the vote does nothing to legitimize continued military rule and is more likely to strengthen Mr. Musharraf's opponents.

Pakistan's most powerful Islamic party had called even before the referendum for Mr. Musharraf's removal. Now, other political parties are likely to follow suit.

The U.S. has refrained from commenting on the vote, calling it an internal matter. But a crisis of legitimacy in Islamabad is the last thing Washington needs just when Pakistan is a key player in the war against terror and U.S. troops are trying to find al Qaeda forces along the country's border with Afghanistan.

Mr. Musharraf went to extraordinary lengths to get the 62 million eligible voters out, setting up 87,000 polling stations in every conceivable location, from gas stations to hospitals. Voters were asked vote "yes" or "no" on whether they wanted Mr. Musharraf to remain President for the next five years.

But lax voting rules are likely to discredit the results in the eyes of many. There were no voting lists at polling stations and the government had so relaxed voter-identification rules that many people in Lahore and Karachi voted simply used their business cards. Several Pakistani journalists and officials of nongovernmental groups said they had voted as many as eight times at different locations, just to test the system. A group of European nuns and at least two Western tourists in Lahore said they had voted just for the fun of it. Voters' thumbs were marked with what officials said was indelible ink, but it washed away easily.

In Lahore, polling stations registered only a handful of voters and closed two hours early-after presiding officers stamped blank ballots "yes" and stuffed them into the ballot boxes. Government efforts to attract the female and youth votes-the latter by lowering voting age to 18 years from 21-appeared only partly successful. Few women were seen voting, though young men at universities voted in large numbers.

In sharp contrast, there was brisk voting at polling stations set up in government offices, prisons, army barracks, police stations and factories and hotels where government workers and private employees were all told to vote. At Lahore's railway station, workplace for 5,000 civil servants, employees were told to vote at one of several locations in the station when their shifts ended. "I am here because I have been told to vote, not because I want to," said porter

Rehmat Ali. "And of course my superiors have told me to vote for Musharraf."

In a speech Monday on state television, Mr. Musharraf said the referendum would usher in a new era of democracy and authorize him to pursue another of his political goals: amending the constitution to give the military a permanent role in running the country.