

## Six Questions for Ahmed Rashid on the Elections in Pakistan and U.S. Foreign Policy

Scott Horton - 28/02/2008

American interest in Pakistan picked up suddenly when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, and then came back briefly as the Pakistani elections produced surprising results. In a word, they were a clear-cut defeat for Pervez Musharraf. I turned to the foremost commentator on Pakistani politics for some predictions, to Ahmed Rashid. Operating out of Lahore.

Rashid is the author of three books including the best sellers 'Taliban' and most recently 'Jihad.' He has covered Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia for the past 25 years and writes for the 'Far Eastern Economic Review,' the 'Daily Telegraph' and 'The Wall Street Journal.'

Q: When we last spoke, the one thing concerning the elections about which you were clear was that there was going to be a massive effort to skewer them. In fact there were a great many press reports in the last weeks suggesting that the vote was being rigged, including the report issued on the eve of the elections by Human Rights Watch quoting Pakistan's Attorney General Malik Qayyum as stating that the elections would be "massively rigged." In the end, the results emerging are plainly a disaster for Pervez Musharraf and his party. So what happened? Would it have been a still more dramatic loss absent the tinkering, or did the Government back off of plans to jigger the results?

A: There was massive pre-poll rigging for weeks before the election. The European Union Observer mission and the EU parliamentary delegation have both pointed this out in their interim reports. This kind of rigging depending on the government helped the candidates of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League -Q group (PMLQ). Senior bureaucrats and police officers were reshuffled district to district to favor candidates, the voting rolls were tampered with and a lot of people sympathetic to the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) were knocked off the voter lists. All the transport to bring voters on the day was pre-booked with bribes and threats by the PMLQ and there was direct intimidation on opposition candidates by the intelligence agencies to stand down. Finally the local government officials in the districts who had been directly elected and were part of the local government reforms that Musharraf had bought in in 2002 should have been suspended from office before the elections. Instead they were in office and were able to use all available government machinery to help the PML-Q candidates.

I think two things happened to stop rigging on election day. The first was that the PLM-Q was over-confident that the pre-poll rigging they had done was enough to swing the vote in their favor. They didn't need to make a spectacle of rigging on the voting day because of all the advantages that they held beforehand and had created for themselves. They were over confident. However the second factor was that 48 hours before the elections the new army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, signaled to all army and ISI officers in the field to tell all senior bureaucrats and police officers in the districts not to interfere with the vote but just maintain order. In this way the army pre-empted any rigging by the candidates or the bureaucracy on the day. The third factor was international pressure. With the focus on the elections, and the presence of some 500 monitors from largely Europe but some from the US, nobody wanted to take the risk of rigging on polling day.

Neither we the media, nor the opposition parties, could accept that given the pre-poll rigging that there would not be polling day rigging. However, then there was some selective rigging in about 20 cities which it is believed caused PPP candidates to lose (and therefore they could not get their majority needed to form a government on their own) and to make certain die hard candidates of the PMLQ win. Even now the results from some ten constituencies are still not in and are being disputed. The worst offender in all this has been Musharraf's nominated Election Commission that has not questioned a single complaint by the opposition parties. There are now two thousand complaints piled up from before and after the elections and not a single one has been answered. The Election

Commission is still too terrified to do anything that may annoy Musharraf.

Q: What's your best guess as to the government that will emerge from this election?

A: The decision by Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif to form a coalition government comes as a major step forward in lifting Pakistan out of its political morass and putting it back on the rails. The new alliance announced on February 17 is between the Pakistan People's Party—the left of center group that won the largest number of parliamentary seats in the 18 February elections and now led by the husband of martyred Benazir Bhutto, and the right of center Pakistan Muslim League—N group led by Nawaz Sharif which came in a close second. Together the two parties control over one half but below two thirds of the seats in parliament. The provisional results (ten seats are still to be announced as of this writing) showed the PPP lead with 87 seats of the 272 elected seats in the new National Assembly, the PML-N or the party of Nawaz Sharif held 67 while the PML-Q came in third with just 39 seats.

However the new coalition government will have to face continuing behind the scenes efforts by President Pervez Musharraf and the intelligence agencies to undermine them even before they are allowed to govern. Musharraf's agents backed by a section of the Washington establishment had been secretly trying to persuade Zardari to go into alliance with the former ruling party — the Pakistan Muslim League-Q group. The Q group has been decimated in the elections—23 ministers lost their seats and today it is leaderless, visionless and without an agenda—except it remains a pawn in the hands of Musharraf. Once again Washington seems to have misread the public mood, the public hatred for Musharraf and the Q group.

The new PPP-PML-N coalition at the center could prove very positive for the provinces also. In the North Western Frontier Province that has been torn apart by civil war and a resurgent Pakistani Taliban movement, the majority of seats have been won by a PPP ally, the Awami National Party (ANP). The ANP has perhaps some of the most seasoned and battle hardened Pashtun politicians in the country—a pedigree that goes back to the 1930s and it has tried, despite blockages put up by Musharraf, to foster a more modern and moderate image of Pashtun nationalism than the one put up by the Pakistani Taliban and al' Qaeda. Now it will have every chance of success. The ANP is an avowed secular and democratic party. In Sind province that has previously been torn apart by the bloodshed perpetrated by the Sindhis represented by the PPP and the Urdu speaking Muhajirs represented by the MQM, there is now an offer by Zardari for both parties to form a coalition government. That would be hugely welcomed by the people of Karachi and other urban centers in the province who have borne the brunt of past violence.

In Balochistan, the only province where the Q League has won some seats, Zardari has promised to talk to the Baloch nationalist leaders all of whom boycotted the elections and many of whom are in jail, in exile or underground. The nationalists and separatists are leading a guerrilla war in the province against the army and Musharraf refused to hold any dialogue with them. Instead he repeatedly threatened them which only made them more angry. So far the nationalists have not responded to Zardari's offer. Punjab, the country's largest and most important province would be most likely ruled by the PLM-N because it has the largest number of seats there but by cooperating at the centre there is unlikely to be any major rift between the PPP and the PLM-N as there was in the late 1980s, when one rival party ruled the center and the other ruled Punjab..

Q: How do you assess Pervez Musharraf's viability following the elections?

A: For the first time in more than a decade the country will be ruled collectively by parties who have separate strengths in each province and even more important they all agree on a minimum agenda to fight terrorism, reduce inflation, get the army out of politics and strengthen civilian institutions like the judiciary. This will be a major blow to the control exercised since 1999 by Musharraf and the army. Sharif had been demanding an immediate reinstatement of those judges sacked and jailed by Musharraf, but he seems to have watered down his appeals in the light of advice from Zardari, who perhaps has the same goals but wants to go about it more slowly. The PPP which believes in a transition rather than an immediate transformation does not want to annoy the army and those around

Musharraf. Nor has Zardari endorsed Sharif's earlier call to impeach Musharraf. The speculation that the opposition could impeach Musharraf if it gained two-thirds of the seats in the parliament now seems to have been put on the backburner.

What is more likely to happen is that Musharraf himself will be nudged backwards into a much weaker role than in the past as the new army chief General Ashfaq Kayani forms a new relationship with the country's civilian leadership and assures them that the army will not be used to undermine them. That will help cut away Musharraf's powers, his authority and further undermine his credibility and his ability to continue dominating the political spectrum. The longer he stays the greater the danger that this new government will unravel because he will not stay still and accept the role of being a weak president. It is best that he be forced to resign as quickly as possible by the army and the politicians without creating a crisis.

Q: You've taken a strong focus on the Northwest Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The role played by al' Qaeda and the Taliban—both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban—and other allied radical groups was very significant in this election, and Musharraf's ineffective efforts to combat them was plainly a major issue. First, give us some account of how the election played out in the NWFP and the FATA. Then give your sense of how a new government, presumably including the PPP, is going to address this crisis?

A: The defeat of the Jamiat-e-Ul-lema Islami party which ruled the NWFP since the rigged 2002 elections has been a huge victory and a repudiation for the Pashtuns that they do not like fundamentalists or Taliban and prefer a democratic party like the ANP to rule them. An ANP government in the NWFP in alliance with the PPP will help bring the crisis there under some kind of control. Both parties are also committed to political reform in FATA, that is ending the British legal code of 1903, bringing FATA into mainstream politics under the Pakistan Constitution, giving the people basic rights, rule of law and the same services and facilities as other Pakistanis enjoy and finally allow them to decide upon FATA's future—whether it will become a separate province or join the NWFP. All this is now eminently doable if the army wants it to happen. So far the army has been the biggest block to any kind of progress because it would prefer to keep FATA's present status as an anomaly. FATA needs a vision for the future which will help isolate the extremists while winning over the people to its side. Only a political government can offer such a vision to FATA. At the same time the army will be needed to maintain law and order and protect local tribesmen who do accept the writ of the government.

The army and Washington should also consider the degree to which the new government in the center and the NWFP is likely to be strongly welcomed in the region, by neighbors who have all had major problems with Musharraf in the past. There have been big celebrations in Kabul at the victory of the ANP. President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan will be hoping to see a real crackdown on the Taliban leadership that has been given sanctuary in Pakistan and he knows and has a good relationship with many of the new leaders in the PPP, the ANP and the PML-N. He is particularly close to the ANP leaders whom he calls his brothers. India will be hoping to see greater progress in confidence building measures between the two states that could help start a dialogue on resolving the Kashmir dispute. Iran will be less apprehensive that Pakistan may do a deal under the table with the Americans to help subvert Iran. Russia, China and the five Central Asian states will support the new process in the hope that it will bring stability and end the army's on-off support for Islamic militancy which has allowed Islamic militants from their countries set up shop in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Q: In a recent interview with 'The News on Sunday,' you said "This is the biggest failure of the Americans — not to understand that the real problem in Pakistan is the lack of legitimate government." Can you break that down a bit for an American audience? The accepted wisdom in the United States has consistently been that the real problem in Pakistan is Islamabad's failure to exercise control over the NWFP and Balochistan and that the only feasible government for Pakistan is one that the Pakistani military backs or supplies. How is the accepted wisdom wrong?

A: The U.S. has relied upon the Pakistan army in the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960, in the Afghan war

against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and so for it to depend again on the army in the war on terrorism is not unusual. The problem is that this is not an external war but an internal war or even a civil war in parts of NWFP. Here what is needed is a government and local authorities which have the confidence of the people so that they can fight the extremists but also deal with public problems and deliver services. None of this the army is capable of doing and the Americans have utterly failed to realize this. Its like asking the US army to provide goods and services to all the American people just as well as the state governments do. This is not rocket science but the brilliant heads at the State Department and the Pentagon fail to understand that what is needed on the ground is not just guns but guns and butter plus everything else delivered by a real government- not an illegitimate military regime.

The American solution is to give more money to the army (already around 80 percent of the US\$ 10 billion the US has given Pakistan since 2001 has gone to the army). The US now wants to give US\$ 750 million to the army for the development of FATA for the next five years and US\$ 350 million for the rearming and training of the Frontier Corps (FC), the paramilitary force doing much of the fighting in FATA. There are two problems here. Development work cannot be done by the army but by civil society which the army failed to protect in FATA when the Taliban and al' Qaeda came to settle there after 2002. Now FATA's local civil society—tribal leaders, religious leaders, journalists, businessmen, school teachers, shopkeepers have been killed or driven out. The army should plan to bring these people back, protect them and help them develop plans for reconstruction rather than do it themselves. Until that happens, no NGO will work in FATA.

The FC has been on the front line of Pakistan's jihadi foreign policy for the past thirty years. It helped the Mujheddin defeat the Soviet Union, it fought alongside militants in Kashmir and fought with the Taliban in the 1990s in Afghanistan—all this was part of the Pakistan's army's power projection in the region. So before we begin arming the FC the US should be setting down conditions for the Pakistan army to screen the FC, restructure it, create a new officer corps untainted by jihadi politics and do other things that will affect the training and morale of the FC and turn it into a modern force. Instead the army is doing none of these things and the Americans are demanding nothing from the army.

Q: Both victorious parties, the PPP and PML-N, but especially the latter, campaigned on their promise to reinstate the 60 or so judges of the superior judiciary sacked by Musharraf last November. But now, as the exigencies of Realpolitik assert themselves, both parties are softening their stance. The PPP in particular has been articulating a reconciliatory position, saying that they are willing to form a working relationship with Musharraf after a government is formed. The U.S. has been pressuring leaders of both parties to work with Musharraf rather than seek his impeachment, which would be impossible if the judges were reinstated. Aitzaz Ahsan, a lawyer, PPP politician, and leader of the lawyers' movement for the reinstatement of the sacked judges is planning a mass demonstration in the form of a "long march" by lawyers next month and has vowed to continue protests until Supreme Court Chief Justice Chaudhary and the rest are returned to their positions. How do you think this situation will play itself out? And what is your take on Ahsan? Could he potentially emerge as a serious challenger to Zardari for power and prominence within the PPP?

A: Everyone is in favor in principle of a new and independent judiciary and the restoration of the judges. The question is one of timing and priorities. This is the most delicate stage in Pakistan's history. Will Musharraf and the army really allow this coalition government to take power, will it hand over power to it, will it allow it to take back some of the powers of the president that Musharraf had usurped. In other words the first priority is setting up a civilian government, being able to accrue power to it and stabilizing that government by working out a relationship with the army and Musharraf.

The second stage would be to deal with other pressing issues like the judges, the war on terrorism, the fast deteriorating economy, etc. Aitzaz Ahsan has been a hero for the past one year because he has been one of several lawyers who have led the civil society movement in favor of an independent judiciary and other freedoms. But now he is acting dangerously and precipitously because he is trying to jump the gun. He is trying to make the judges issue the main priority when it is not. He is forcing a split in civil society that has so far unanimously supported the judges issue, but now that a real moderate government has a chance of coming to power — civil society does not want to blow those chances. Lastly parliament should decide how and when and in what manner the judges should be restored rather than one man take the decision. A civilian government should act differently from a

dictatorship, and parliament not the army house should be supreme.

There are now several problems related to this. There are already new judges appointed by Musharraf, do you sack them or do you invalidate the oath they took to be loyal to Musharraf—because if you do that you would unravel the entire election process and the validation that Musharraf has put in place to get himself forgiven for all his unconstitutional actions. If you try and unravel that now, it could prompt a second army coup. Secondly the army is firmly against any restoration of the former Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudry. Do you confront the army? No civilian government can survive a confrontation with the army now, it can only negotiate with the army the best way to resolve this issue. Civil society and many in the lawyers and human rights movement are now asking Aitzaz to slow down and be patient and not charge at the barricades and lose everything. I think most people understand this issue now in such a way .