



South Asia in Election Mode: Focus on Pakistan

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The year 2013 appears to be a 'year of hope' for South Asia, as many of the countries of this region go to polls. Whereas Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives are due for election in the middle of this year, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and India will have polls by early next year. These elections are significant because the region has witnessed instability for long, and is still struggling for the survival of democracy. The region has seen military coup and the politics of flux, economic volatility, deep social cleavages and terrorism, frequent external involvement, criminalisation and corruption; now democracy, stability, transparency and development have become key issues in these elections.

The most exciting and closely watched is the national and provincial elections (Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies) in Pakistan, which are to take place in less than a week (on 11 May 2013). For the first time in the history of Pakistan, it will be a transition from a civilian government, which has completed full five- years of democratic rule, to another. It is truly a positive sign in the process of democratisation in Pakistan. But even if the political institutions and public at large remain successful in retaining its democratic structure in the forthcoming elections, the role of Pakistani Army cannot be overlooked. Though the Army has made it clear that they will support democratic elections, apprehensions are that the Army will remain the most powerful institution in the country and given their track record, they will continue to exert influence in politics. Moreover, besides focusing on democratic transition,

transformation at broader level will remain a bigger challenge for any political party, which comes to power.

One of the main political contenders in Pakistan's forthcoming elections is Nawaz Sharif. He has served twice as Prime Minister in the 1990s and heads the second largest political party i.e. Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N). He is contesting two seats of the National Assembly. Recent public opinion surveys indicate that PML-N is the frontrunner in the upcoming national polls. His call for turning Pakistan into an 'Asian Tiger' with new infrastructure and to run a government with 'zero tolerance' against corruption have been well received by his supporters. He has also expressed his willingness to improve diplomatic ties with India and restricting the military's role in Pakistan's domestic politics. Further, he favours peace talks with the Pakistani Taliban to end a deadly militancy that has plagued Pakistan for many years. Sharif's support base consists of right-wing forces, the business community, the middle class and youth.

Former cricket star Imran Khan is another important player. His political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan's Movement for Justice) or PTI, was found in 1996. After struggling for long, Khan has, in recent months, emerged as a serious political contender, leading many to believe that he could become Pakistan's next prime minister. His slogan of 'Naya Pakistan' i.e. a 'new Pakistan', has resonated among the people who are tired of the state of political affairs in Pakistan. The PTI chief is a critic of Pakistan's alliance with the United States and wants to end anti-terrorism cooperation by making Pakistan financially self-reliant. Khan is contesting from four constituency districts of the National Assembly and has attracted support from two main groups i.e. urban women and youth, who constitute more than 60 per cent of the national electorate. Whether he wins or loses, he has certainly become a force to reckon with.

Popularity of the incumbent Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has been undermined because of socio-economic instability and allegations of corruption and economic mismanagement during its tenure. Over the five years, the PPP was strongly criticized for not being able to address basic issues, such as worsening national energy crisis and runaway inflation. Relations between India and Pakistan, particularly bilateral trade, witnessed some significant improvement during its tenure. The party is now struggling to win over voters in the national polls, but it is still expected to dominate in its traditional power base i.e. southern Sindh province. On the other hand,

President Pervez Musharraf's return from self-exile has turned out to be a fiasco; and he has been barred by the Pakistani courts to contest election and has been put under house arrest.

There are a number of regional players, who may influence the upcoming elections. One of the important contenders is Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who heads the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam or JUI-F party that draws support from followers of the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam. The Pashtun politician Asfandiyar Wali Khan, who is the current president of the Awami National Party (ANP), is another strong contender. In the last elections, he formed a coalition government in north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and was a partner of the PPP-led coalition at the centre. Another right-wing political party, Jamaat-i-Islami's head Munawar Hassan has led the party ever since winning intra-party polls in 2009. Hassan is considered by many as an ideological hardliner and his party opposes normal bilateral trade and travel links with India until serious talks regarding the disputed Kashmir region takes place. Another contender is Chaudhry Pervez Elahi of Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-i-Azam) or PML-Q. He supported Pervez Musharraf after the coup in 1999 and enjoyed his backing until he was in power, but now he has lost its political clout and is no longer a strong player in mainstream politics. Besides these political actors, judiciary, as a non-political actor, is also influencing politics to a great extent.

Amidst speculations regarding free and fair elections, frequent terrorist attacks and 'target killing' of candidates just before the general elections have raised concerns within and outside Pakistan. PTI, PML (N) and parties having Islamic stamp are fearlessly running their campaign. The other major parties like PPP, ANP and MQM and their leadership are on terrorists' hit lists. In such a scenario, it is worth watching who wins the election and what implications the outcome will have for Pakistan's relationship with India.

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