

Pakistan: the election and after

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A month before the elections scheduled for [8 January 2008](#) [1], Pakistani political parties are still intensively debating the pros and cons of taking part. The two large opposition groupings - the All Pakistan Movement for Democracy (APMD) led by Nawaz Sharif, and the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD), led by Benazir Bhutto - have been [divided](#) [2] over the issue, with the two former prime ministers being in direct [contact](#) [3] by telephone to exchange views.

The thirty-three party APMD includes small parties like Imran Khan's Justice Party that have very little representation, and can therefore afford to take a [tougher](#) [5] line. The larger parties, on the other hand, are reluctant to leave the field uncontested to their rivals; this consideration lies behind Sharif's [announcement](#) [6] on 9 December 2007 - after a lengthy meeting of the APMD that his faction of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) would, after all, be [contesting](#) [7] the poll.

President Pervez Musharraf - now retired from the army, and replaced as its chief-of-staff on 28 November by his handpicked successor [General Ashfaq Kayani](#) [8] - declared on 9 December that the state of emergency will be [lifted](#) [9] on 15 December 2007, a day earlier than previously announced. But the protests against the clampdown continue to rumble. The two biggest political parties in the respective opposition coalitions - Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif's faction of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) continue to deploy their supporters in an attempt to maximise pressure on Musharraf; lawyers are still demonstrating outside courts across the country, and clashing regularly with the police.

The lawyers' challenge to Musharraf's rule, sparked initially by his suspension of chief justice [Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry](#) [10] in March 2007, remains a key element in the overall political situation. The demands for Chaudhry's restoration - as well as that the score or so of his colleagues on the supreme court and provincial high courts who have been removed in the wake of the emergency imposed by Musharraf on 3 November - have come from the legal profession, civil society and many Pakistani citizens. They remain a sticking-point too for the two major opposition leaders.

Benazir Bhutto has adopted the more flexible approach on this issue. She believes that this is one demand Musharraf will

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never concede, as restoring the ex-chief justice would mean his own political demise. It was, after all, an impending supreme-court judgment that would have barred Musharraf from re-election as president that led to the emergency in the first place. The return of Iftikhar Chaudhry to his position would result in the swift demolition of the shaky [legitimacy](#) [10] Musharraf has achieved by removing his military uniform and getting sworn in as a civilian. But Nawaz Sharif wants this at the top of the [charter of demands](#) [11] which the APMD and the ARD have been painstakingly drafting to pressure the government to hold free and fair elections.

A fine calculation

Four weeks before the election, it appears that disunity over the principle of an election boycott is slowing the momentum in favour of such a tactic. After all, non-participation makes political sense and is most effective only if all the opposition parties join hands. But in addition to the APMD decision, Maulana Fazlur Rahman - head of the biggest religious party, the *Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam* (JUI-F) - has announced his own party's participation. This in turn has placed the six-party clerical alliance of the *Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal* (MMA) in a quandary; the coalition is [convening](#) [12] a meeting on 11 December to discuss the issue. The MMA, having tasted power under Musharraf with whom it was earlier [allied](#) [13], may be reluctant to stand aloof from the election, especially as this might mean leaving the field open to the JUI-F and being out in the cold in the post-election dispensation. But a similar calculation has not yet swayed [Qazi Hussain Ahmed](#) [14] and fellow hardliners of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JI), who are in favour of a boycott.

Amid these opposition manoeuvres and posturings, most observers are of the view that they will all [contest the elections](#) [15] after extracting as much as they can from Musharraf in terms of assurances that the elections will be free and fair. But Musharraf's allies and coalition partners - the *Quaid-e-Azam* ("Q") faction of the PML cobbled together in the aftermath of the 2002 elections - are desperate for official support to secure a sizeable number of seats in the 8 January poll. But it faces the formidable Benazir Bhutto and (in Punjab, Pakistan's biggest province) Nawaz Sharif, and risks getting wiped out in a fair election.

Musharraf, too, would be in dire straits if the two major opposition parties seize control of parliament. So there is every incentive for Pakistan's powerful military-intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to rig the polls as it has done in the past. Much here will depend on the attitude of General Kayani, and the extent to which he will be his own man; thus far, he has maintained a low [profile](#) [16], and given every indication of wanting to keep [Pakistan's army](#) [16] out of politics.

["Pakistan's poker-game \[4\]"](#)
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Between Swat and Dubai

These uncertainties have now been absorbed by the stock market that has staged a strong rally at the prospect of an election. No major politician stands for a reversal of Musharraf's liberal economic policies, so the business community feels it can work with any elected government. The unknown and potentially disruptive variable is the possibility of the lawyers continuing their movement even after a new government has been formed, in the event it fails to restore the chief justice. The legal fraternity fears - and with good reason - that once elected, politicians would not enjoy dealing with an independent chief justice any more than Musharraf did.

[11]" (19 November 2007)

Saskia Sassen, "Lahore: urban space, niche repression [11]" (21 November 2007)

As the political and constitutional confrontation in Pakistan [17] continues to build, there is good news from one front. After being virtually taken over by Islamic militants, Swat valley, a tourist attraction in the northwest, has been liberated by the army. Nearly a division was deployed, with helicopter gunships and artillery sanitising hilltops before they were occupied by army units.

The young cleric who led the insurgency, Maulana Fazlullah, has fled, and his home in Mingora has been destroyed [18]. The militants who supported him had, according to reports, been joined by scores of "foreigners" - including Tajiks from Afghanistan and central Asia. The army claims to have killed over 200 extremists, and arrested over a hundred. A military spokesman has announced the construction of a permanent base in the valley to ensure that the insurgents do not reassert their control. The fighting has not definitively ended; a suicide-bombing against a police checkpoint on 9 December killed [19] eight people in the area. But the army's breakthrough creates the conditions for the thousands who had fled to return [20] to their homes.

The state's other internal enemies are not so fortunate. The government's campaign against the electronic media continues. Most of the private TV channels have returned to the airwaves; but the most popular one, Geo [21], has not because the management has so far refused to sign the "code of conduct" now being demanded by the government as a precondition to broadcast. Geo is based in Dubai where the UAE authorities earlier took it off the air [22] at a request from the Pakistan government. Now, the Gulf authorities have permitted it to resume broadcasting, but its programmes are not available to Pakistani viewers as the government has prohibited cable operators from carrying the channel.

After the election

All this means that the election [23] process notwithstanding, it is doubtful that it alone will bring closure to the many problems currently wracking Pakistan. The tensions created by the imposition [23] of an emergency on 3 November will not dissolve even with the election of a truly representative government. Whatever the outcome, the results will be questioned and challenged by the losers. There are already voices to be heard across the political spectrum claiming the elections will be massively fraudulent. While these charges are not without some truth, they might well also serve discourage people from voting.

As it is, voter turnout in Pakistan has been traditionally low, with only a third of registered voters casting their ballots in 2002. One reason for this apathy is that people have seen government after government being ejected by the army in the 1990s. So they have begun to feel that their votes do not count for much in the face of military might. Then, in many socially less developed parts of the country, few women vote. In tribal areas of Balochistan [23] and the North West Frontier Province, for example, they are simply not allowed to leave their homes to go and vote.

In a free and fair election contested by all the major parties [24], the most likely result is a hung parliament with the PPP and Nawaz Sharif's faction of the PML forming the majority. If and how Sharif and Bhutto will be able to resolve their past differences and cooperate in running the country is far from clear. If the two leaders have learned their lessons from the last decade in the wilderness, they will be able to work out a power-sharing formula that keeps the army and the Islamists out. But if they haven't, Pakistan is in for an extension of its rocky ride.

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[10] <http://www.scp50.gov.pk/cj.htm>

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[13]

<http://the%20mma,%20having%20tasted%20power%20under%20musharraf%20with%20whom%20they>

[14] <http://www.jamaat.org/leadership/qha.html>

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[20] <http://www.dawn.com/2007/12/09/top4.htm>

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