

PolicyWatch 1341

Pakistani Elections and the Middle East

[*Simon Henderson*](#)

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After a six-week delay following the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, Pakistanis will go to the polls on February 18 to elect a new National Assembly. Pakistan and Afghanistan are "where many of our most important interests intersect," as Director of National Intelligence J. Michael McConnell told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on February 5. Accordingly, the election results could affect the position of a key U.S. ally in the war on terror -- the increasingly unpopular President Pervez Musharraf.

Pakistan and the Middle East

Although not an Arab country, Pakistan has intimate ties with the Middle East. Several countries in the region employ Pakistan's excess labor supply and provide it with diplomatic protection in its historical standoff with larger adversary India. In turn, Pakistan's military helped train the Jordanian and Saudi armies in the past, and provides the same service to the United Arab Emirates today. Pakistani-produced equipment has been sold to several regional militaries, and discredited Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadir Khan supplied uranium enrichment technology to Libya and Iran in the 1990s. This transfer certainly took place with the connivance of elements in the Pakistani military, if not the leadership itself.

Given their intimate links with Pakistani politicians over the years, several Middle Eastern governments will be watching the election results closely. For example, Benazir Bhutto lived in exile for several years in Dubai before her return to Pakistan last October. Her brother, Murtaza, turned to terrorism and found sanctuary in Libya after the Pakistani military ousted and executed their father, former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Another example is Ms. Bhutto's rival, Nawaz Sharif, former prime minister and one-time protege of past Islamist dictator Zia ul-Haq. Head of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), Sharif used his Islamist ties to earn support from Saudi Arabia, which probably viewed Bhutto's Shiite origins with suspicion. He found refuge in the kingdom after Musharraf ousted him in 1999 and then again last September when he tried to return. Although he remains barred from standing in the elections, he was finally granted reentry to Pakistan with Saudi help.

Political connections aside, Pakistan's principal link to its Middle Eastern allies is its strength as a nuclear and missile power. Today, its closest links on this front are with Saudi Arabia, which probably sees Pakistan as a crucially Islamic alternative to any U.S. security umbrella against Iran.

It should be mentioned that Pakistan has tested three different nuclear missiles in the past two weeks: the Ghauri, based on the North Korean Nodong, which can reach any part of India; the Shaheen, based on the Chinese M-11, with less than half the range of the Ghauri; and the Ghaznavi, an unguided, short-range missile. The tests serve to demonstrate that whatever the election results, Musharraf will remain the national leader, and that he still holds considerable influence with the military despite his army retirement.

Multiple U.S. Concerns

U.S. concerns about Pakistan center on al-Qaeda, democracy, and nuclear weapons. On February 9, a senior U.S. official told the BBC that former Taliban leader Mullah Omar and members of his leadership council were living in the western Pakistani city of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province. Al-Qaeda is known to operate freely in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and in the adjacent Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) that adjoins Afghanistan. These areas are training grounds for jihadists who later spread throughout the Middle East, and Bhutto's assassination was allegedly organized by Baitullah Mehsud, an al-Qaeda-affiliated Taliban leader in the area. Moreover, according to the same U.S. official, "there is no question" that al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri are in Pakistan's tribal areas.

In the words of McConnell, U.S. interests demand that Pakistan remain "a critical partner in U.S. counterterrorism efforts." Yet, it is far from clear whether this is a priority for the Pakistani military, which has used Islamist groups to undermine India in the past. Pakistani political parties are similarly ambiguous on this issue, particularly religious parties in Baluchistan and the NWFP.

Pakistani Politics

Although Washington has been pressing for elections, many questions remain about their potential aftermath.

According to McConnell, "Pakistan is establishing a new modus vivendi among the army, President Musharraf, and elected civilian leaders." This is perhaps best viewed cynically rather than optimistically, however, since the election results will likely be contested. Past elections have often been rigged, with the army's feared Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) playing a major role.

Gen. Ashfaq Kiyani, Musharraf's replacement as chief of army staff, has publicly announced a policy to withdraw the military from civilian functions. Last year, however, while serving as ISI director, Kiyani led the negotiations with Bhutto regarding the conditions for a possible homecoming and potential bid to run for prime minister.

Regarding the potential electoral effects for Musharraf, a two-thirds vote in the new National Assembly would be required to strip him of his presidency. Currently, however, no single party seems likely to win an overall majority in the elections, though Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), now under the leadership of her widower Asif Ali Zardari, could emerge as the largest winner. Zardari himself, who has been accused of corruption and political murder in the past, is not a candidate. He has declared his leadership temporary until his nineteen-year-old son Bilawal, currently attending Oxford University, reaches the age of twenty-five.

Despite talk of gaining a sympathy vote on the heels of Bhutto's assassination, the PPP's strength remains mainly in the southern province of Sindh. The party holds little sway in Punjab, where 65 percent of Pakistanis live, and its electoral track record is modest. In recent elections, it has failed to win more than a third of assembly seats; its projected tally is around 27 percent this time.

Even if these projections were more favorable, it is difficult to tell what implications PPP electoral gains would have for U.S. interests. The pro-Western image created by Ms. Bhutto was largely for foreign audiences, particularly the United States. She was not the anti-Islamist she tried to portray herself as -- in power she actually boosted Islamist factions -- and her party is traditionally socialist, led in a feudal manner by a succession of Bhuttos. Yet, the rival PML-N headed by Nawaz Sharif has even greater Islamist ties than the PPP.

Awkward Outcomes for the United States

Washington is facing dubious alternatives: another Musharraf-dominated administration that lacks political legitimacy, or a potential political crisis sparked by a massive anti-Musharraf vote that may lead to a hiatus in Pakistan's counterterrorism measures. A key indicator will be the stance adopted by the military. Although a hands-off role by General Kiyani is unlikely, the casting of his figurative vote will show how he wants Pakistan to relate to both the Middle East and the United States.

Simon Henderson, the Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Policy Program](#) at The Washington Institute, formerly served as Islamabad correspondent for the BBC and Financial Times.