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Pakistan Elections 2013: Some Countdown Reflections

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On Saturday 11 May 2013, 82 million Pakistanis would be eligible to vote in the general election to elect 272 members of national parliament. In most modern countries well-crafted opinion polls can now reasonably accurately predict the outcome of elections. But this is not so in the case of Pakistan. There are two main reasons for this. First, according to the latest voting-intention survey, only 50 per cent of eligible voters are likely to vote for one of 4,670 candidates contesting the election. Secondly, in most modern countries, voting behaviour is determined by three Ps: party, policy, personality. In Pakistan voting behaviour is largely determined by *personality* of the candidate and his/her party. In a layered society like Pakistan, personality is often the proxy for ethnic, tribal and sectarian affiliations. Notwithstanding these factors, is it possible to identify a broad contour of the election outcome? In the following, I attempt to do that.

Given the dominant role of personality, the main actors in the forthcoming elections are: Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML(N), Imran Khan of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The other actors belong to regional Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) in urban Sindh, Awami National Party (ANP), Jamat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and urban Sindh. As far as name-recognition goes, Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan and Asif Ali Zardari have national profiles.

Analysis of their support bases (in this context) shows that Sharif, at 66 per cent, has the highest favourable ratings, followed by Khan at 60 per cent. Zardari is viewed by a whopping 83 per cent Pakistanis unfavourably. These perceptions are translated into support for their respective parties. At the national level, Sharif and his PML(N) are supported by 41 per cent,

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PPP by17 per cent and PTI by 14 per cent Pakistanis (All these estimate have a margin of error between +/- three to five per cent). Their support also has important regional base. PML(N) has the highest support in Punjab and moderate-to-low in KPK. The PPP has the highest support base in inner Sindh and moderate-to-low support in urban Sindh and south Punjab; and PTI has the highest support base in KPK and moderate-to-low in urban Sindh, north and western Punjab. MQM's main support base is in urban Sindh, while JUP and JI have moderate support bases in KPK.

If this support base translates into actual votes on 11 May, then PML(N) is likely to end up with the largest number of parliamentary seats compared to the other parties. My analysis of these trends suggests that PML(N) will get between 112 to 120 seats, PPP between 54 to 60 and PTI between 50 to 70 seats in the national parliament. The other seats will be divided between MQM with probably 15 to 18 seats and ANK, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and JI with 12-15 seats. The situation in Baluchistan is very unsettled and it is difficult to know the likely distribution in that province which has 14 seats.

Beside the name-recognition factor, support for PML(N) is based on its effective governance of Punjab, the largest Pakistani province, over the past five years. This is most visible in improvements of roads and urban infrastructure, which should deliver good election dividends for the party. The PPP will lose support because of its appalling failure in addressing economic, energy and security issues as the ruling party over the past five years and also the universal disapproval of its political face: President Zardari. It will maintain some electoral presence in south Punjab because of its support among the Shias and its alliance with leading landlords and the Pir families. In rural Sindh it will be supported as a Sindhi party because of its affiliation with the Bhuttos.

Imran Khan Factor!

PTI has emerged as the 'unknown factor' in this election because of the surging popularity of its leader Imran Khan. He is a nationally revered cricketing hero. His popularity has been augmented by his trenchant criticisms of Pakistani government and leaders and by his passion for the country's future. These have resonated among Pakistanis, especially the young, and lifted his profile and the political fortunes of PTI. The leadership of PML(N) is very concerned about Imran Khan's rising political fortunes, as it is likely to dilute its political capital. The opinion polls show that PTI will get support in central and northern Punjab, KPK and Karachi by attracting the wavering PPP and PML(N) supporters, especially the young.

On the minus side PTI is facing problems in KPK where a vicious campaign led by the JUI leader Maulana Fazal-ur-Rahman is underway against Imran Khan who is accused of having 'Jewish connection'. This has been outlined by Australian political scientist Samina Yasmeen in an article on 8 May. Imran Khan is accused of having links with 'Jewish lobby', implying that PTI is getting financial support from the Goldsmith family of Imran Khan's ex-wife. The aim of this campaign is to undermine Imran Khan's credibility as a Pakistani leader. There is no evidence that this campaign is affecting Imran Khan's and PTI's standing elsewhere, because the mainstream national media has not bought into it. In the Punjab, however, PTI's credibility is challenged for its not having any political capital to show. It is plausible that Imran Khan's accident and injuries on 7 May, requiring his hospitalisation, will attract sympathy vote. But even before the accident, his popularity was not increasing; and importantly 28 per cent of Pakistanis in the latest Pew survey reported they 'did not know'

him. This was the highest "don't know" response among the three main leaders. These factors further make it difficult to assess Imran Khan's and PTI's likely impact on the election outcome. It is highly improbable that PTI will get more than the seats I have mentioned above. It is also unlikely that PTI will get a majority in the provincial assembly of KPK as predicted by some analysts.

Thus the most likely outcome of the election will be a hung parliament, with PML(N) with most seats but not an outright majority, followed by smaller number of seats for PTI, PPP and MQM and other regional parties. This will mean a coalition government led by PML(N) with two other parties, one of which may be PTI, because unlike MQM, PPP and ANP, PTI has openly campaigned for the establishment of an Islamic welfare state which is compatible with the conservative, Islamist and anti-US rhetoric of PML(N). Such a prospect will create a real dilemma for Imran Khan, as he has persistently rejected the idea of joining a coalition with the existing political parties. The end result may not be a stable political situation but it will reflect the social and political realities of modern Pakistan.

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