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The results of parliamentary elections came as a big surprise for Musharraf and his allies.

President Musharraf was expecting a big victory and he repeatedly expressed these views. In his interview with the British newspaper, the Independent, he categorically said that his party - the PML-Q (Pakistani Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam)) – and its main ally – the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) - would get a majority in the 18 February elections. But the people have given a different verdict. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Benazir Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, and Nawaz Sharif's PML-N (Pakistani Muslim League – Nawaz) have both emerged as winners. In the Musharraf camp, only the MQM has been able to retain its vote bank and support.

The PPP has won a majority in the National Assembly with 90 seats out of 272, but fell short of a simple majority to form the government. The PML-N has also done well and came second on the national level with 70 seats.

Musharraf's PML-Q got only 40 seats. The biggest loser is the (MMA) – the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal religious parties' alliance – which won only five seats in total.

The turn-out was not as low as many were predicting. It varied from area to area. It was at an historic low in Baluchistan and some areas of North West Frontier Province and was around 15 % in some other areas. According to official figures, the turn-out was 45% overall. In Lahore and some other cities, the turn-out was around 30%. In the rural areas of Sindh and Punjab it was high.

Big blow for Musharraf

The outcome of these elections is a big blow for Musharraf and his political dispensation. The leaders of the PML-N, ANP and PPP have already made the demand for the resignation of Musharraf from the presidency. Although he was elected president from the previous assemblies, he now needs to get a vote of confidence from the new ones, which seems impossible at the moment. The opposition majority in the parliament will further isolate him. The new army chief has already started to distance himself from Musharraf. Many ex-generals, senior technocrats and political commentators

are asking him to resign gracefully and hand over power to the elected leaders. He has refused, and decided to face the situation.

Musharraf was confident after removing the rebellious judges and imposing Martial Law on November 3, that he had control of the situation and that his position had been strengthened. Since March 9, 2007, when he decided to get rid of the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhary, whatever he has done to strengthen his position has proved counter-productive. He tried to rig the elections but the army refused to become part of this plan. The new head of the army, Ashfaq Kayani, clearly instructed the intelligence agencies not to get involved in politics. Now Musharraf has started to realise that he has lost his strength after doffing the uniform of army chief.

Having held a firm grip on power for eight years, the former general and key US ally in the fight against Al Qaeda, will now have to make frantic deals with a hostile parliament that could, in theory, call for his impeachment. Musharraf will become a 'lame duck' president. For him the most crucial issue will be his political survival rather than the 'War against terror'. Musharraf will find it difficult to work with the opposition that wants to undo most of the steps taken by him after the suspension of the constitution in November under the state of emergency. He will try everything to retain power and continue as president. He may try to split the opposition and manipulate the PPP, or a faction of it, in order to survive. But it will not be easy for him to do this. His future now depends on the formation of a coalition government. If the PPP, PML-N and the Awami National Party, (Pashtun nationalists) are going to form a coalition without the pro-Musharraf MQM then his future will be bleak and he will not be able to last long. Musharraf can get some breathing space if he can convince the PPP leaders to form a coalition government with his PML-Q. But it is extremely difficult for the PPP to form such a coalition but it is the only hope for Musharraf.

Grand coalition

The most likely coalition government will consist of the PPP, PML-N and the ANP (Awami National Party). The formation of such a coalition will not be an easy and straightforward process. There are differences between

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these parties on many issues. The PPP and ANP want to continue the present 'War on terror', but the PML-N wants to review this policy. The ANP and PPP are not interested in the restoration of the deposed judiciary, but the PML-N want to restore them at any cost. The PML-N takes an uncompromising stance against Musharraf but the PPP wants to demonstrate some flexibility with him. Each party will try to get maximum concessions from the others to satisfy its own supporters. The ANP will push for further provincial rights and autonomy.

If the PPP tried to form a government without the PML-N, then it would be an extremely fragile and unstable government which will not be able to last long. The establishment will try its best to bring a weak government in that it can handle easily. A strong government always becomes a problem for the ruling elite. A weak government will also suit Musharraf because it will be easier for him to manipulate things in his favour. The situation will become clearer in the next few days.

Short-lived illusions

The people are celebrating the victory of the opposition parties on the streets. They are happy that they have been able to defeat the PML-Q and the religious parties. The mood is one of joy and happiness. There are also some illusions about the new government. The masses will give some time to a new government before starting to demand action. The illusions will be short-lived as the masses want immediate results. The working class and poor of Pakistan wanted the prices of food and other daily essential items reduced. They wanted justice, equality, better living, an end to poverty and repression. All this cannot be achieved under the present system. The new government will not be able to solve these problems because it will continue the same free market economic policies pursued by the previous government. The present illusions will turn into disillusionment and then anger.

PML-Q routed

The PML-Q was confident of winning the elections with a clear majority, including in the Punjab and Baluchistan. They were also very confident that the establishment would rig the elections for them. They used all sorts of dirty tactics and repressive measures to win the election. PML-Q candidates were offering money for votes. In some areas they offered 1,500 to 2,000 rupees (\$20 to \$30) for each vote. The district and provincial administrations were openly working for them. They spent billions of rupees on the election campaign through the press and electronic media. They also tried to buy votes through development

work. In Punjab, even the police were used to pressure the people in rural areas to vote for pro-Musharraf candidates. But all these efforts and dirty tricks failed to muster support for the PML-Q candidates. Almost all the main leaders and ex-ministers lost in the elections, including the party's president and prime ministerial hopeful. All the leading figures who were considered very close to Musharraf have lost badly. The PML-Q was completely routed in Sindh, NWFP and the urban areas of the Punjab. It has performed well in Baluchistan provincial elections and become the single largest party in the provincial assembly.

But the people have overwhelmingly rejected the policies of the Musharraf regime and its allies. The PML-Q got only 13% of total votes cast. In this election, workers and poor people have expressed their anger against the neo-liberal economic policies of the PML-Q, which had increased poverty, unemployment, hunger, prices of food and essential items and power cuts and food shortages. Living standards and the quality of life were falling at a rapid pace under the PML-Q-led government.

PPP made gains

Even though the PPP was able to win 90 seats in the national assembly and a majority in the Sindh provincial assembly, it has failed to convert the sympathy factor of Benazir Bhutto's assassination into a big electoral victory. It got its largest share of votes with 30% nationally, but fell short of the 40% that had featured in all the predictions. The PPP got a big chunk of votes from rural Sindh, but failed to make much impression in Karachi and Hyderabad - the largest cities in Sindh province. In Punjab, it finished second behind PML-N. The People's Party also did well in the national assembly voting in the NWFP and Baluchistan provinces and finished second to the ANP and independents respectively.

According to all the surveys and predictions conducted before the elections, the PPP was expected to win between 110 and 120 national assembly seats. The party leadership failed to get this number because it solely relied on the sympathy factor of Benazir Bhutto's killing and did not campaign around the issues faced by the poor masses and working class. The leadership failed to assess the mood of the masses and lost ground to other parties in different areas. The PPP failed to attract the voters and poor masses in Punjab province, especially in the cities. These elections once again proved that the PPP is not enjoying the support of these layers as it did in the 1970s and 1980s.

The PPP was considered the party of the masses and working class in the 70s and 80s but now the

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consciousness of the working masses and their attitude towards the party has changed. It still enjoys considerable electoral support but not as a party of the poor. It has lost its best opportunity to win enough seats to form a government on its own because it has no clear programme, strategy, slogans to mobilise the masses. The PPP failed to take a clear stance on the issue of the judiciary, price hikes and on the Musharraf regime.

Big swing to PML-N

The PML-N led by ex-prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, emerged as the main winner in these elections. Nobody was expecting that the PML-N would win 70 national assembly. It completely routed the PML-Q and the PPP in the cities of Punjab. It won nearly 50% of seats in the Punjab but won 88% of urban seats. It failed to win any seat from the Sindh and Baluchistan provinces. PML-N got a big chunk of the anti-Musharraf vote in Punjab. In the last election in 2002, it was only able to win 17 seats but now it finished with 70 - a gain of 53 seats. PML-N leader, Nawaz Sharif, took a clear anti-Musharraf stance and promised to restore the deposed judges including the chief justice of the Supreme Court. His party ran its campaign on the issues that are faced by the poor masses. It used anti-establishment radical demagoguery and slogans to get the support of working and middle class voters. Nawaz Sharif succeeded in putting himself forward as an alternative to end Musharraf's rule and its tyranny. His party succeeded in mobilizing both the right wing middle class and pro-democracy working class and poor votes.

Religious parties wiped out

The biggest losers in these elections were religious fundamentalist parties. The MMA alliance only managed to win five national assembly seats. In the 2002 elections, this alliance won 55 seats and also a clear majority in the provincial assembly of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) with 64 seats out of 99. But in this election it could only manage eight provincial assembly seats. NWFP was considered a strong base for religious parties but the election results show a completely different trend. The secular and liberal PPP and ANP won the majority of the votes. The poor people of NWFP and Baluchistan have rejected the religious fundamentalist forces who failed to deliver during their term of government.

The MMA had fully capitalised on the anti-American sentiments in NWFP after the imperialist aggression on Afghanistan. But the MMA government in the province failed to solve any problems faced by the poverty-stricken masses. The people were also furious because the MMA failed to control the rising tide

of religious extremism and militancy. The pro-establishment policies of the MMA leadership also contributed to their demise. The voting trend is a clear indication that people in this province do not want a Taliban and Al-Qaeda brand of Islam and militancy. The election results nationally also reflect this trend and sentiments. The overwhelming majority of the population is not in favour of Talibanisation or religious fundamentalism. In the Swat area of NWFP, where Islamist forces took over five cities a few months ago and the military operation is still going on, the secular nationalist ANP won all the national and provincial assembly seats. The main leaders of the religious alliance have lost to PPP and ANP candidates.

Since 2002, Musharraf was giving the impression to the west and at home that if he allowed free and fair elections then religious extremists would win and get control over the country. But these elections clearly expose this idea as a myth. The Socialist Movement, Pakistan (CWI) correctly predicted the demise of religious parties in previous articles. The working class and poor masses are not yet ready to follow the forces of self destruction and darkness.

Working class alternative needed

The election results clearly show that the working masses and poor peasants want change. They have voted for opposition parties to bring change and improve their lives. But the PPP, PML-N and other opposition parties do not want a real change in the system. They represent the same ruling class and want to defend their system and interests. There is no party of the masses and the working class which can defend them and work for their rights and interests. The working class urgently needs its own party with a clear programme of radical change and socialism. All the reactionary forces that have been defeated in the elections will come back if the present rotten capitalist and state structure is not changed radically. The parties and leadership of the ruling class will have nothing to do with that.

The SMP is fighting to form and build this party of the working class and poor masses. These elections and a new capitalist government will not solve anything, including the deep-rooted political crisis in Pakistani society.

We say:-

- Reduce the prices of food, electricity, gas and other essential items by at least 50% immediately!
- Abolish feudalism and distribute lands to the landless peasants and poor farmers.
- For a new election, to a revolutionary constituent assembly to prepare a democratic socialist constitution with full democratic and national rights!
- For a workers' and peasants' democratically-elected representative government!
- Stop privatisation! Nationalise the economy including big industries, banks, land, trade, finance and insurance companies under democratic workers' control and management in a planned economy!
- No to military dictatorship; end tyranny and repression!