

YOUNAS A. CHOWDHRY

# PAKISTAN'S NEW DEMOCRATIC SPACE

A LEFT PERSPECTIVE ON THE POST ELECTION SCENARIO

Pakistan in the post-2013 election period has experienced a resurgence of right-wing conservative parties. The decline of the historically right-of-centre Pakistan Peoples' Party's (PPP) position in the current elections and the consolidation of national assembly seats by the neo-liberal and business-friendly Nawaz League, marks significant challenges for both the left and liberal forces. Pakistan's nascent democracy is fraught with many policy challenges. However, despite these challenges, it must be noted that Pakistan's political history has experienced a paradigm shift and the new political climate must be viewed from that perspective. This paper introduces the challenges that the young democracy faces, the trajectory of the political dispensation and the position of the Pakistani left within the overall framework of Pakistan's political scenario.

## THE MAY 2013 ELECTORAL OUTCOME

The outcome of the 2013 elections took many people by surprise; the Muslim League's (Nawaz) victory probably came as a shock to many people, especially given how both traditional and social media had constantly predicted that a wave of change was going to take the country by storm and usher in a "New Pakistan". At that time, the Pakistani media, which often acts as a political force along with the newly politicized middle class intelligentsia, was pointing towards the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI, Movement for Justice), as the probable winners. The slogan of this party was "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan). The party's main aim was to eliminate "corruption" in the country. However, the post-poll result proved otherwise and the majority was won in the national assembly by a traditional party (PML-Nawaz Group), with PTI and PPP being the runners up.

However, the dynamics of electoral politics are a little more nuanced than commonly understood. Without going into the details or describing the structural problems that any political dispensation promising change would have to contend with, it is important to note the challenges this growing democracy faces and their implications for the political situation as a whole.

## THE THREAT OF A MILITARY TAKEOVER

From the very outset of Pakistan's independence in 1947, the military assumed the role of a state-within-a-state and often acts as a political force, independent of the will of the elected government.

The majority of Pakistan's political history has been mired by dictatorships – the most recent being that of General Musharraf's government from 1999 to 2008. With the end of Musharraf's regime, military rule was severely discredited, and this made it much more difficult for the military to assume power due to its lack of support among the public. The military as an institution has been further discredited due to scandals connected to its inability to protect military installations from attacks by militants. Furthermore, the operation carried out to eliminate Osama Bin Laden in the heart of Pakistan is another example of the constant criticism to which the military has been subjected. However, even without direct power, the military has deeply embedded itself into the Pakistani body politic and the military continues to influence foreign policy as well as domestic affairs through its clandestine agencies such as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Military Intelligence (MI). Presently, it could be argued that the military "allows" this developing democracy to evolve and the democratic transition to take place.

Another factor that affects the military's ability to seize control is the influence of the United States in the region. The conditional support in terms of aid through the Coalition Support Fund (CSF) and funds disbursed to Pakistan via the Kerry-Lugar Bill<sup>1</sup> have kept the military in check. Part of these conditions involve the military not seizing control. However, with the possible withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and a shift in focus of the US government towards domestic issues, it is unclear whether the US will continue with this stance.

## **REGIONAL COOPERATION AS A DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE**

Regional cooperation is an essential form of development – Pakistan is a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).<sup>2</sup> However, with Pakistan and India being the key players in this body, South Asian regional cooperation primarily boils down to the relationship between these two neighbours. Pakistan and India have fought wars on three separate occasions, with further occasional exchanges of border hostilities between their respective militaries. Presently, any attempt at reconciliation by either country's political and diplomatic apparatus is thwarted by attacks orchestrated by non-state actors (militant Islamic outfits), allegedly under the influence of the Pakistani Army.<sup>3</sup> As a result, larger issues of contention such as the Indus Water Treaty,<sup>4</sup> regional trade and power supply from countries in the region, tend to be relegated to the background. Kashmir is another issue that is often ignored due to the lack of diplomatic talks between the two countries. Another facet of this is the Pakistani military's *raison d'être*: the putative threat from India that enables the military to ensure defence is prioritized in budgetary considerations. This situation would change if the relationship between India and Pakistan were to normalize. Therefore, it can be argued that one of the chief parties in the process is the military itself. Whether the top brass can be persuaded to become party to regional cooperation is another moot point.

## **DOMESTIC CRISIS AND VOTER PERCEPTION**

There are a number of domestic challenges for the newly elected Sharif government that require well-coordinated policies. Thus far, nothing seems to have been done in public to solve the power crisis, law and order problems across the country and the problem of militancy. Pakistan suffers from a severe energy deficit, with power outages experienced by domestic consumers for over 12 hours a day on average. From a business standpoint, the textile industry – a key industry in Pakistan – is severely affected by the power crises and this has resulted in the shift of capital and the textile sector itself to Bangladesh, which provides tax incentives and cheaper power. This affects both local employment and domestic manufacturing. Another reason cited by local entrepreneurs for shifting their investment is the Preferential Trade Agreement signed between Bangladesh, the United States and the EU. This agreement provides its signatories easier access to these markets. A recent government estimate states that around 40% of Pakistan's looms have been moved to Bangladesh; the main reason being the poor power supply. The power crisis is a direct result of the circular debt problem, which emerged due to the payments owed by the government to independent power producing companies (IPPs), during the Musharraf Regime. Interestingly, the PPP government's inability to cope with the power crisis was one of the main reasons it was not re-elected.

Law and order crises in Pakistan, especially the situation in Karachi and Quetta, prevent foreign investment in the region. Karachi is particularly faced with targeted killings conducted by rival political groups. In Quetta, an armed Baloch nationalist struggle continues against the military and genocide is being committed against the Hazara community by sectarian militant groups. The militancy in the north has continued unabated for around five years and there are even rumours of the government inviting the militants to peace talks; this

could be troublesome, given the past overtures associated with peace deals.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Afghanistan, Pakistan has a different form of Taliban. The Taliban are organized as a coalition of groups under the umbrella of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Their agenda is largely Pakistan-centred and they are responsible for most of the domestic militancy in the north as well as other parts of the country. The new government has been hinting at a peace deal. However, given the past trend, it is unclear whether a peace deal would ensure that the militants stop their aggression.

The perception of the masses is tainted largely by the government's inability to tackle these problems and the public mostly desires immediate redress. Such a commonplace perception of the government can be dangerous as it could provide the military with the ammunition it needs to seize power; it has done this in the past under the "doctrine of necessity" and this would enable the military to enter politics as a welcomed "saviour".

## **THE POSITION OF TRADE UNIONS AND THE LEFT**

Since the 1980s, and Zia military rule, Pakistan has been part of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Structural Adjustment Policy regime. Consequently, it has been required to reduce its fiscal deficit. In the absence of any reduction in defence expenditure, this has been done by slashing development expenditure, such as funds for schools, hospitals and other welfare services, or through aggressively privatizing key state industries. Some of these industries were even operated for profit. For example, the privatization of the Pakistan Telecommunication Corporation (PTCL) and selling of its shares to a United Arab Emirates based company during the Musharraf government was a huge scandal.<sup>6</sup> This case reflects a consistent trend towards privatizing key state facilities in Pakistan. Furthermore, during the Musharraf period, an industrial relations ordinance was introduced that legalized the employment of contractual workers in the private sector. It also enabled contractors to bring in their own workers, and make employers less liable for the well-being of wage labourers employed in different industries. Presently, in many factories there is a mix of contractual and permanent labour with the number of contract workers being higher in most cases. This has delivered a severe blow to the power of unions both within the public and private sectors, and the unions have yet to recover from this. Informalization of the economy has provided another blow to organized labour and this trend has increased rapidly over the last decade. Informal sector businesses are harder to organize and can easily circumvent labour laws and unionization due to their smaller size.

The tradition of left politics in Pakistan's history has been overshadowed by pro-US military regimes that have largely cracked down on left-wing organizations such as communist parties, trade unions, peasant movements, student unions and other progressive forces. Historically, unfavourable regimes have forced left-wing groups into the underground or to dissipate completely. What remains of the left in the post-Soviet era are fragments of various groupings which grapple with relevancy in mainstream discourse. Interestingly, there has been a recent shift in the age-old exclusion of the left. By and large, the Pakistani left participated in the 2013 elections. Notable left-wing parties such as the Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party (CMKP), the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), Awami Worker's Party (AWP) and International

Marxist Tendency (IMT) fielded candidates in constituencies throughout the country. Another interesting factor was the inter-party unity and support of each other's campaigns in the respective constituencies by various parties. However, the question of class politics is still a greater determinant of the outcome of the Pakistani elections and the results of the elections proved that the left as a whole is not yet prepared to contest for office, at least not for a considerable period of time. This is not because there are no genuine left-wing ties to people's movements and labour struggles; on the contrary, the present elections were approached with the sole perspective of representing these movements and popularizing left-wing discourse in various public spheres. But in the face of billions of rupees spent by the parties of the status quo, the voice of the left goes largely unheard.

The future of the left now resides in finding creative approaches and new analyses to understand how to break class barriers and develop relevancy in the mainstream arena. A greater understanding of the class structure within Pakistan is needed, especially within the framework of the informal economy. It would also be important for the left to find common alliances, if not strong unity, among different parties and approach this new democratic space as a united front so that common issues can be combatted more effectively.<sup>7</sup>

### THE WAY FORWARD AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The history of Pakistani politics should be viewed as a continuum and therefore it is important to keep in perspective the emergency, imposed by General Musharraf in 2007, and the consequent Lawyer's Movement to restore democracy and rule of law in Pakistan. The movement was successful in deposing a military dictator. Pakistan has come a long way since then. The elections on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2013 represent a culmination of what that movement started: a democratic process. For the first time, Pakistan has experienced a democratic transition. While this may not seem like much – given how the common imagination in Pakistan and abroad tends to preclude a picture of history as a continuum – it does represent a number of things for Pakistanis, especially the Pakistani left.

First, it needs to be understood that regardless of the outcome of the elections, civilian rule has assumed primacy. If voters feel empowered and start to invest more hope in the system, in time this system will develop its own processes of checks and balances. If the politicians in power are aware that they will have to return to their voters once their term expires instead of being overthrown by an ambitious general, they will continue to perform and deliver.

Secondly, while the outcome of the elections might not be acceptable to many Pakistanis both on the left and the right, they may continue to play an active role. Processes of democratic transition offer a new political space to assemble, organize and voice dissent. This pressure should be kept up whenever the government of the day reneges on its promises to the people. The task of the left, given the transition that Pakistan has experienced, is to utilize this free space to expose the limitations of the current system while at the same time bringing labour discourse to the fore. Now is the time to organize and provide the mainstream with the alternative to right-wing parties that has been missing for a very long time.

Thirdly, while the current political leadership is not ideal from a left-wing perspective, it must continue to hold office until its term expires. This is important because experience shows that the usual alternative in Pakistan is military government.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, given the current political dispensation, the kind of change many wish to see in Pakistan might not be forthcoming, but it must be acknowledged that Pakistanis have taken a qualitative leap in history that might ultimately proceed in that direction.

Younas A. Chowdhry is a political activist from Pakistan. He is a director of Laal Theater and a member of the Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party (CMKP). He can be reached at younas.chowdhry@gmail.com

1 A law passed by the US congress authorizing the release of 1.5 billion USD of non-military aid to Pakistan in the period from 2010–2014. 2 Other SAARC member countries include India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives. 3 The most recent case was the Mumbai terrorist attack (2008) by the Pakistani militant outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), currently known as Jamat-ud-Dawa. The LeT was established by the Pakistani military as a proxy against India. Hafiz Saeed, the chief of the group, roams scot free in Pakistan, allegedly with the protection of the ISI. 4 The Indus Water Treaty is a water sharing treaty between India and Pakistan. The Indus Basin flows into Pakistan from India. Presently, the Pakistani side disputes the Indian construction of dams on rivers that flow into Pakistan through Kashmir. 5 In 2009, after a month long insurgency in the Swat (Malakand Division), the government signed a peace deal with the militants ceding the territory to them and allowing them to setup Islamic courts and a parallel government. This resulted in a reign of terror in the region and soon after, the militants breached the agreement by attacking Buner, which was outside of the area ceded to them. As a result, the government ordered a military operation, which has been on-going ever since. 6 The PTCL privatization also resulted in a slash of 60% of the workforce (out of a total of 65,000) and hiring of contractual workers and thus reducing the power of one of the strongest unions in the country. 7 An example of a creative way of making left-wing discourse current and mainstream is the policy of the CMKP through its cultural movement that goes by the name of LAAL (Red). The movement is a cultural canvas that has a band, theatre, a large social media following, film makers, documentary makers, working class poets and a youth group. This initiative has re-introduced left discourses into the mainstream and has made socialism attractive. Similarly other organizations are following suit and re-orienting their organizations to do the same. 8 A recent example was the ousting of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani in 2012 by the judiciary. Pervez Ashraf from the same party was appointed to serve out the party's remaining term until 2013.

---

### IMPRINT

POLICY PAPER is published by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung  
Responsible: Henning Heine  
Franz-Mehring-Platz 1 · 10243 Berlin, Germany · www.rosalux.de  
ISSN 1867-3163 (Print), ISSN 1867-3171 (Internet)  
Editorial deadline: October 2013  
Proofreading: Linguatransfair, Berlin  
Setting/Production: MediaService GmbH Druck und Kommunikation  
Printed on Circleoffset Premium White, 100% recycled paper

---

## POLICY PAPER

**07/2013**

MILDRED NGESA

**Kenya: Voting for our own**

The Dynamics of Tribal Politics in  
the Eastern African State

**06/2013**

MANUEL PALZ

**A Bumpy Road for Myanmar**

Challenges and Opportunities for a Social and  
Equitable Future in this Southeast Asian Country

**05/2013**

CORNELIA HILDEBRANDT /

HORST KAHRS / HARALD PÄTZOLT

**After Eight Years of Merkel: No Trouble?**

The Political Climate in Germany in the Summer  
Before the Election

**04/2013**

PETER DAHLGREN

**Do Social Media Enhance Democratic Participation?**

The Importance – and Difficulty – of being “Realistic”

**03/2013**

ERHARD CROME

**Germany in Europe**

A New Role after the Financial Crisis?

**02/2013**

ULRICH BRAND / ULLA LÖTZER /

MICHAEL MÜLLER / MICHAEL POPP

**Big Business Emissions Trading**

Against the Financialization of Nature

JUTTA KILL

**Active Climate Protection means Abolishing**

EU Emissions Trading

**01/2013**

PETER SCHÄFER

**Our Help as a Threat**

A Contribution Concerning the Effect of “Development Aid”  
and “Democracy Promotion” in the Arab World

**01/2012**

THOMAS SABLONSKI

**Impoverishing Europe**

---

## STANDPUNKTE INTERNATIONAL

**11/2013**

MICHAEL GLASS

«Lieber rot als schwul»?

**10/2013**

ANTONIO MARTINS

Brasilianischer Frühling oder Putsch von rechts?

**09/2013**

MANUEL PALZ

Steiniger Weg in Myanmar

**08/2013**

TORGE LÖDING

Wachsende Unzufriedenheit in Costa Rica

**07/2013**

PHILIPP GERBER

Europäische Unternehmen erzwingen das grüne Geschäft  
mit dem Wind in kolonialem Stil

**06/2013**

CLAUS-DIETER KÖNIG

Mali: Vom «Hoffnungsträger» zum «KrisenStaat»

**05/2013**

JULIAN MARIOULAS

Verantwortung in der Krise

**04/2013**

BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

Chávez: Vermächtnis und Herausforderungen

**03/2013**

ALICE B. M. VADROT

Bedrohtes Wissen, bedrohtes Leben

**02/2013**

AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT

Krieg in Mali

**01/2013**

JORGE LEÓN TRUJILLO

Wahlen in Ecuador: Perspektiven des Correa-Systems