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As Pakistan Election Nears, Citizens Fan Out to Combat Vote Rigging

By PETER WONACOTT
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RAWALPINDI, Pakistan -- Tens of thousands of Pakistani civilians have signed up as election monitors, fostering hope that Monday's national vote will end a history of rigged elections and restore stability to this jittery, nuclear-armed nation.



Ambreen Saba

Ambreen Saba Khan is one of them. The 27-year-old teacher has been patrolling this army garrison town outside Islamabad with a notepad and camera phone, meeting with politicians and local officials. She's looking for signs of vote rigging, such as politicians promising money, jobs or gifts for votes.

Pakistan can ill afford the kind of problems that have sparked unrest following past contests. Voters will be choosing members of Parliament. The party that winds up on top will nominate the next prime minister, who will share power with embattled President Pervez Musharraf. Voters will also select governments in the nation's tribal regions and four

provinces, two of which have been run by a coalition of conservative Islamist parties.

There is widespread concern that the election will be manipulated. Ms. Saba, who works with a local group called the Free and Fair Election Network, is cautiously optimistic that the political process can work. "I would like for my country to be peaceful," says Ms. Saba. "And for that we need democracy. Real democracy."

Vote monitoring in the past was mostly a scattershot exercise overseen by small bands of activists. This time, battalions of independent election monitors have been drawn from the nation's growing middle class. Most of them are in their twenties and thirties.

"Never before has there been such large scale mobilization for a Pakistani election," says Ahmed Bilal Mehboob, executive director of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, another election-monitoring group. "The role civil society is playing has been a real positive."



Pervez Musharraf

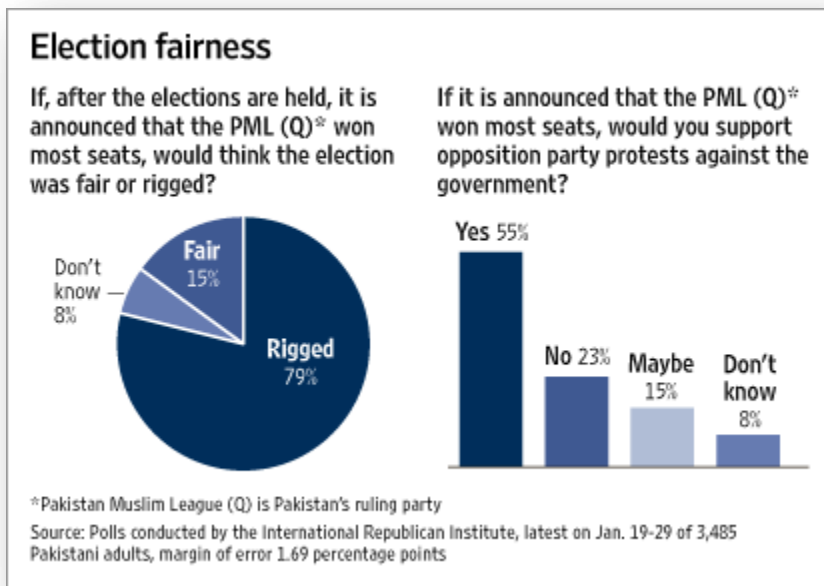
An Islamist insurgency, rising food prices, power outages and the Dec. 27 assassination of popular former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto have fueled unrest in this nation of 165 million. If the election results are seen as credible, that could defuse tensions and nudge Pakistan's fractious political parties to form a more unified government.

The vote also could help determine the fate of Mr. Musharraf, a key U.S. ally in the global war against terrorism, whose popularity has nosedived in recent months. Last year, when he was also serving as head of the army, he was re-elected president in a controversial vote. After a group of lawyers mounted a legal challenge, Mr. Musharraf declared a state of emergency and dismissed

judges on the Supreme Court. He was sworn in for another five-year term after he lifted the emergency and replaced most of the Supreme Court judges.

The assassination of Ms. Bhutto reignited opposition and deepened his troubles. In a public-opinion survey conducted late last month, 62% of respondents said they believed Mr. Musharraf's government was responsible for Ms. Bhutto's death; only 13% believed government claims that al Qaeda was involved. The survey by the International Republic Institute, a Washington-based nonprofit group, also showed that 75% thought Mr. Musharraf should resign.

His unpopularity has stoked fears that his supporters will try to manufacture votes to avoid defeat for the main political party that backs him, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q). His supporters dismiss the allegation. "The opposition is always complaining about poll rigging," says Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, former minister of railways from Rawalpindi, a Pakistan Muslim League (Q) candidate for re-election to parliament. "There must be free and fair elections. There will be."



Some of Mr. Musharraf's opponents predict he will lose his backing in Parliament even if some voting irregularities occur. "Even with a little bit of rigging, say

10%, we should win a majority," says M. Enver Baig, a senator for the Pakistan

People's Party, or PPP. That party, which was led by Ms. Bhutto, now has as its co-chairmen her widower, Asif Zardari, and her 19-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto, a student at Oxford.

If the PPP gains control of Parliament, it could team up with another opposition party to try to reinstate ousted Supreme Court judges. An independent Supreme Court could hear fresh legal challenges to Mr. Musharraf's re-election, possibly forcing him from office. Another scenario -- one that some politicians on both sides believe plausible -- is that the PPP and Mr. Musharraf's allies will come together in a governing coalition.

Pakistan's history of suspicious elections is a long one. In 1977, after a sweeping victory that sparked protests over alleged vote rigging, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Ms. Bhutto's father, declared martial law in several cities. He was overthrown in a military coup and hanged two years later. Allegations of rigging tarred elections in the 1990s that brought Ms. Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in and out of power as prime ministers. The elections of 2002, which introduced a Parliament stacked with supporters of Mr. Musharraf, were also tarnished by allegations of fraud.

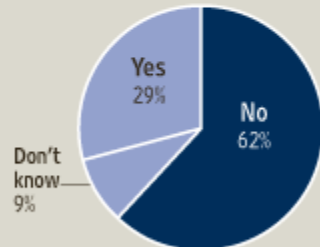
Code of Conduct

Foreign election observers participated in recent elections, but the coverage was spotty, election experts say. Last year, Pakistan's Election Commission established a detailed code of conduct for political parties. The code prohibits voter intimidation, rumormongering and public disorder. It even stipulates sizes for campaign posters and banners. Election-monitoring groups have complained that the code isn't enforced.

Looking for Change

Pakistanis polled recently were critical of their current government.

Q: Would you say that the ruling coalition has done a good enough job to deserve re-election?



Source: International Republican Institute polls, the latest on Jan. 19-29 of 3,485 Pakistani adults. Margin of error is +/- 1.69 percentage points.

A spokesman with Pakistan's Election

Commission says the government body has set up a unit to review complaints about the current election. Those that merit investigation are being passed on to district judges in the areas concerned, says the spokesman, R.B. Jan Wahidi, joint secretary for elections.

In a televised address Wednesday, Mr. Musharraf pledged that the voting would be fair and peaceful. "I am extremely conscious that these elections must be free, fair and transparent," said President Musharraf. "The world is watching us."

In a report last month, the Citizens Group on Electoral Progress, made up largely of former judges, journalists and retired government officials, deemed the buildup to the election "highly unfair," and said the prospects for a clean vote are "very slim." The low marks came after the group assessed a range of measures, including the neutrality of the president, his caretaker government and local officials.

Finding Citizens

At first, it wasn't easy to find citizens willing to observe polling stations. Last year, leaders of the Free and Fair Election Network, or Fafen, a coalition of 40 independent organizations, despaired over how to recruit enough volunteers. "We thought it would be a nightmare," says national coordinator Muddassir Rizvi.

But Mr. Musharraf's actions over the past several months -- his challenges to the judiciary and his declaration of a state of emergency -- have produced a tidal wave of volunteers. Fafen has enlisted 20,000 people to observe polling stations, and has deployed monitors like Ms. Saba to observe campaigning and voting in

more than 250 election zones. Like other such groups, Fafen has received funds from Western aid agencies.

Ms. Saba, the daughter of a retired air force officer, began working last spring for a nongovernmental group affiliated with Fafen. She had recently earned a master's degree in agricultural science and was teaching. She says she wanted to help instill in her countrymen the same values she saw in the insects she had studied. "The termites and ants work in such a disciplined manner," she says. "There's such a spirit of self-sacrifice."

The monitoring group assigned Ms. Saba to be a coordinator for one of the election zones, and she began training poll watchers. Volunteers must learn to toe an unfamiliar line in Pakistani politics -- they must remain neutral.

Early on, Ms. Saba recalls, a campaign worker for one candidate offered her 60,000 rupees, about \$950, if she helped introduce new names to the voter rolls. She refused, then informed her boss, who decided not to take further action because there was no written evidence, she says. More recently, she says, various campaigns have approached her for information on their rivals. She's rebuffed these requests, too, she says.

Training for Volunteers

At the tail end of a recent training session, held in a local hotel next to a noisy wedding reception, Ms. Saba and others asked volunteers to sign a written pledge to not stump on behalf of any party. The volunteers included teachers, housewives and software engineers. "We have heard a lot about rigged elections," said Shabana Ijaz, a teacher who is wrapped in a grey headscarf. "I want to know the reality."

So does Ms. Saba. The next day, she headed out to monitor campaigning in her assigned election zone. The race in this region is considered one of the country's

most volatile. It pits incumbent Mr. Rashid, the former railways minister and confidant of President Musharraf, against Javed Hashmi, a leader in former Prime Minister Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League. Both candidates have spent years of their political careers in and out of jail during unfriendly governments.

The city of Rawalpindi contains the public park where Ms. Bhutto was killed in a suicide attack. Fruit and used-shoe vendors near the park recently told Ms. Saba and a visitor that they support candidates of the late leader's Pakistan People's Party, known for populist policies that have appealed to the poor. They warned of more trouble if the election appears rigged.

Ms. Saba wore a Fafen photo identification outside a denim jacket. Her head was draped in a woolen headscarf; pink lip gloss matched her painted fingernails. She usually arrives unannounced at campaign headquarters and district offices. She must count on the goodwill of politicians, their surrogates and officials to sit through her long interviews.

Looking for Evidence

Ms. Saba says she often begins with an open-ended question, asking what the campaigns are promising voters. What she's looking for is evidence of parties trying to influence voters by promising money, jobs, gifts or land. She also wants to find out whether parties are trying to sway voters in others ways that might violate the Election Commission's code. That includes trying to wring campaign donations out of voters, or to intimidate voters who back opposing candidates to stay away from the polls. As she makes her way through questions, some campaign workers tend to get antsy, shifting in their seats or simply excusing themselves for other meetings.

Before entering one campaign office, she pointed to a billowing banner of Mr. Sharif and Mr. Hashmi. "Up there," she said, aiming her Sony Ericsson camera phone. "Too big." Ms. Saba clicked a photo.

In the evenings, Ms. Saba, who is unmarried, returns to her hostel to write up her confidential reports, which she submits each week, along with photos, to Fafen's leadership. The organization sends out weekly updates that highlight trouble spots around the country.

Ms. Saba has had a tough time pinning down allegations of vote buying. At one meeting, a local *nazim*, or mayor, who is affiliated with Mr. Sharif's political party, accused the competing Pakistan Muslim League (Q) of paying several of his colleagues 50,000 rupees each, about \$790, to drum up support for their candidates. The party's Mr. Rashid said in an interview he doesn't know about such payments, but that there may have been some "small funds for office expenses" extended to some local officials.

At another stop, Ms. Saba met with the local police inspector about one of the most crucial issues of Pakistan's elections: security. Shots fired at polling stations aren't uncommon. There have been suicide attacks at several campaign rallies across the country, including the one that killed Ms. Bhutto and sparked days of rioting, delaying the elections for six weeks. In Rawalpindi, the government is expected to deploy battalions of army rangers to protect voters.

Critics of the government say shaky security will scare away voters. Others worry that too heavy a police presence might intimidate voters, tilting the advantage to government-backed politicians.

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