

Elections on schedule?

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Due to the near and long term dangers it presents and its nexus with stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan has leapt to the top of the global security agenda. The unraveling of the country is by no means a foregone conclusion, but its current course must change to prevent catastrophe. The greatest threat posed by an unstable Pakistan is, of course, to its own population.

In keeping with the need of the time Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Ashfaq Kayani issued orders to withdraw serving military personnel from civilian posts. In a following address to officers stationed at the Multan Garrison, the COAS confirmed "professional pursuits will remain our prime focus". This notwithstanding General Kayani is only too aware that with the volatile situation prevailing in Pakistan, the visible presence of the military is required to ensure peace during the February 18 elections and, to provide the needed security to the 64,000 polling station countrywide, the process of deploying thousands of troops has been set in motion.

Meantime, the Interior Ministry's spokesperson, Brig. Javed Cheema, allayed the opposition parties concerns that the army might interfere with the polls. "All these arrangements have been made to ensure that people cast their vote without any fear in an environment of peace and order. Nobody would be allowed to disrupt the polling". Reminding that more than 1000 international observers and journalists would be coming in to monitor the polls, Brig. Cheema said they would be free to roam wherever they wished barring certain areas in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan where there was a high security risk.

With the wheels in motion there is little likelihood the elections would be further delayed and in realization of this the election campaign of political contenders is in full swing. The heads of the two main political parties, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), PML- N, too, have been hitting the headlines, albeit while expressing reservations on the elections being conducted freely and fairly under President Musharraf, fearing as they do that the Pakistan Muslim League (Qaid-e-Azam), PML-Q would be provided unfair advantage by the caretaker government given its earlier link.

The main bone of contention between the PML-N head, Nawaz Sharif and President Musharraf, is of course on the reinstatement of the judges dismissed by the latter, and Mr. Sharif continues to make an issue of this on the assumption that if the former judges were to be reinstated they would rule General Musharraf's presidency constitutionally invalid. Asif Zardari, who heads the PPP in the absence of his son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari -- the willed heir to the party's leadership after the assassination of his mother Benazir Bhutto -- has shown himself to be of more

pragmatic turn, saying he would be willing to work with President Musharraf in the greater national interest.

As the battle is enjoined between the PPP, PML-N, and the PML-Q, the All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM) which has dug in its heels refusing to participate in an election under the Musharraf constituted election commission, is the main spoke in the wheels. Although not in the poll count of any survey conducted recently, the alliance nevertheless has relevance in that most of the 'nationalist' or purely provincial parties, subscribe to its primary cause, which is opposition to NATO's presence in Afghanistan and the continuing collateral damage inflicted on Pakistan's civilian populace by the US and its allies pursuing their "War on Terror".

Meanwhile, predicting the outcome of free and fair polls an International Republican Institute (IRI) poll conducted recently reads that the PPP will emerge at the top of the national political heap with 50 percent of the vote count, PML-N following with 22 percent and the PML-Q trailing on 14 percent. Should then the PPP and PML-N combine for a national government as the heads of both parties have indicated they well might do, Musharraf's best chance of survival would be to convince them that the PML-Q should be accommodated in the arrangement, offering as a quid pro quo the reinstatement of the panel of judges headed by Chaudhry Mohammad Iftikhar.