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Op-Ed

It's democracy's turn

Walter Andersen

Posted online: Thursday, February 21, 2008 at 2306 hrs

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Prospects for a democratic system that endures have never seemed brighter in Pakistan, writes Walter Andersen



Walter Andersen

Democracy is always messy and Pakistan is in for a period of rather intense messiness as the various winning political parties in the February 18 polls move to establish a more permanent democratic system. Their chances of success are better now than at any time in the country's past. Pakistan now has an aroused civil society, as witnessed by the huge crowds that turned out last year for the pro-democracy demonstrations led by the country's lawyers. The overwhelming popular support for the

parties opposed to President Musharraf gives them the legitimacy to make significant changes. The military is also committed to staying neutral as the politicians begin their work of reshaping the constitutional order. None of the major parties has challenged the outcome, not even the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League (Q), and Musharraf has stated he will honour the will of the people. Pakistani voters braved threats of violence and fears of rigging to register a lack of confidence in the government of Pervez Musharraf. They turned out in unusually high numbers (over 50 per cent in the two largest provinces of Punjab and Sindh) that gave the late Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan's Peoples Party a plurality of the 268 elected seats followed by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (N), and leaving the pro-Musharraf PML(Q) far behind. The religious parties fared poorly everywhere, even losing power in the Northwest Frontier Province to the secular Awami National Party, likely to ally with the PPP to form the government there. The PPP and PML(N) won over half the seats in the key province of Punjab and, with the support of many independents and other regional parties in the National Assembly, are likely to get close to the two-thirds majority needed to clip Musharraf's powers and possibly to impeach the president himself.

The international community has so far registered its approval of the results. The spokesperson of the US State Department, for example, issued a statement that the US is 'pleased' with the elections as a positive move on the path to democracy. China, India and Afghanistan — and the US — are also likely to view the results as positive because the winning parties are secular and support improved ties with Pakistan's neighbours, which ultimately means cracking down on jihadi elements that support cross-border activity designed to wreak mayhem in neighbouring countries. The Musharraf government had an ambiguous record vis a vis such jihadi elements, which has been a source of growing concern in the US.

What follows next politically will be the formation of a coalition dedicated to reducing the powers of the president, if not removing him from power. Musharraf almost certainly hopes that he can exploit real divisions among the opposition to save his presidency, but the opposition anger with him and his government is likely to keep them together until they have achieved their objective. The first step is likely to be to restore the justices removed on November 3 by Musharraf and then support efforts to strip the president of powers he gave himself then and earlier after the start of his first presidency in 2002. There will be a struggle as Musharraf has already said he would not step down. Key in this struggle will be the role of the military. The chief of army staff, Ashfaq Kayani, is trying to keep the military out of politics and is not likely to back Musharraf if he tries to take any dramatic steps against the new government. In fact, General Kayani and the nine regional military corps commanders might collectively decide to put pressure on Musharraf to accommodate the opposition — or even to step down if they perceive him as a threat to the country's security and to the military's corporate interests.

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Pakistan's neighbours and the international community should support this process of democratisation as they will all benefit from it. This should initially take the form of economic assistance. The US in particular should also realise that it is counterproductive to support any single person, as it has done these past several years because of concern that only he could keep the nation committed to a secular anti-jihadi course. In fact, a democratic Pakistan is more likely to keep the country on this course because it would be based on a national consensus rather than the fiat of a single person.

The writer is Acting Director, South Asia Studies, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC

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