

# Will elections be enough for democracy in Pakistan?



DR. SIEGFRIED O. WOLF

**IT IS COMMONLY AGREED THAT MOST DEMOCRATIC ORDERS REST THEIR FOUNDATIONS ON THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES: PEOPLE'S SOVEREIGNTY, LIBERTY AND EQUALITY. THIS MEANS THAT THE MOST ESSENTIAL CONDITION FOR ALL DEMOCRATIC FORMS OF GOVERNANCE IS THE 'FREELY EXPRESSED WILL OF THE PEOPLE WHEREBY ALL INDIVIDUALS ARE TO BE TREATED AS EQUALS'**

By holding general election tomorrow, Pakistan is on the eve of its first democratic transfer of power. Undoubtedly, this is a milestone in the country's chequered political history. The Pakistani people witnessed several coups d'états, military dictatorships, elected governments with strong authoritarian tendencies, or military controlled civilian regimes. But never have the Pakistani people experienced the regular ending of the tenure of a civilian administration that subsequently leads to free and fair elections without any derailment or disturbances being induced by Pakistan's omnipresent security apparatus. Here one should also mention that the official recognition of the election results is a crucial part of the whole democratic procedure too, a phenomenon which is not necessarily a well-known feature in Pakistan's electoral record. This becomes more evident if one recalls the country's particularly unfortunate first democratic elections ever in December 1970 under the martial law administration of General Yaha Khan, more than two decades after gaining independence! At that time, the walk to the ballots was not only marked by the ignorance of the voice of the then East Pakistani electorate, but also by the subsequent war of liberation and independence of Bangladesh.

However, this time it seems that Pakistan's electorate is more fortunate. There is much talk among Pakistani analysts and observers beforehand about several positive signs that the country is now finally making its transition towards democracy. Statements by the military top brass to stay out of politics, the country's successful entering in coalition politics, the passing of several major bills through the national parliament, significant constitutional amendments, and the way in which demands for an extra-judicial technocratic caretaker government got ruled out (cf. the 'Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri incident'), are seen as clear indications that the country is joining the global democratic orbit. But by observing the last weeks of electoral campaigning, political manoeuvres in Islamabad and in the provinces, and dramatic militant incidents that are related to the upcoming elections, Pakistani realities are catching up with the initial enthusiasm of the analysts regarding a consolidation of democracy in the country.

From a theoretical point of view, one can state that

Pakistan is an example par excellence that confirms the notion that elections are not alone sufficient for democracy. Needless to say, there is no single approach towards realising a democratic system of governance. Institutional setups and trajectories towards democracy vary greatly; what works for one country may very well not work for the other. These differences are often, but not exclusively, dictated by a state's cultural context. Nevertheless, it is commonly agreed that most democratic orders rest their foundations on three basic principles: people's sovereignty, liberty and equality. This means that the most essential condition for all democratic forms of governance is the 'freely expressed will of the people whereby all individuals are to be treated as equals' (Axel Hadenius). So far the theory is concerned, one must state that when a country is holding elections, this does not automatically mean that it is a liberal, constitutional democracy, or has a meaningful democratic order.

Having said this, one should draw closer attention on the Pakistani context again. Looking at the empirical evidence offered by the time of the current campaigning, one must state that Pakistan is still far away from matching this commonly accepted democratic credo. The actual political day-to-day business shows that the three core values of people's sovereignty, liberty and equality are still persistently being challenged. This is because there are significant negative impacts on necessary constituents of a democratic regime like the guarantee of political rights which includes the right for political participation and the opportunity to formulate individual and collective opinions, interests and demands. Most important therefore is to ensure the right of freedom of speech as well as the right to association and demonstration in the public arena. Furthermore, according to Wolfgang Merkel, an eminent German political scientist, democracy is also characterised by the existence of individual rights of protections which means in practice the grant of protection of life, freedom and property. The latter was already demanded by the English philosopher John Locke, one of the greatest thinkers of classical liberalism and the age of Enlightenment in Europe. Additionally, Merkel's notion of democracy also includes 'the protection against illegitimate arrest, exile, terror,

torture or unjustifiable intervention into personal life, both on behalf of the state and on behalf of private or anti-establishment forces and individual actors'.

Having this analytical matrix in mind, one can identify a wide range of forms of undemocratic behaviour and aberrations in the context of the on-going electoral process. Most important in this directions are the endemic appearance of severe cut-backs in the rights of political participation, association and information. More concretely, the elections, especially the electoral campaigning, were seriously hampered by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) and related extremist elements. Until now, the

eral local politicians.

The Taliban are threatening particularly non-religious, secular political parties before the electoral campaigning and were also attacking them during respective public campaign events. In the primary focus of their activities were the Pakistan People Party (PPP), Awami National Party (ANP), and Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM). Being accused of following a western ideology and spreading an-Islamic notions, the party candidates, officials and supporters got intimidated and forced not to visit electoral events of the MQM, PPP, and ANP. These distortions in the electoral process make it virtually impossible to speak about a free and fair political competition.

ously hampered but mostly taken off of the agenda. The fact that even the former federal minister Pakistan's Ambassador to the US Shehrbano (Sherry) Rehman is accused of blasphemy and consequently has to face charges in a Pakistani court for her support of revisions to the blasphemy laws shows not only how strong the influence of the Islamists are but also how much the freedom of speech is limited in the country when it come to religious issues. It is also alarming how much ideological fundamentalism in Pakistan gets patronised by authorities, especially the country's judiciary who was accepting the petition against Rehman.

Second, there are massive regional inequalities because

try like Pakistan where access to modern mass communication is limited, a high level of illiterate electorate and an extraordinary cult of personality are widespread, 'people-to-people' or 'face-to-face' contact is of tremendous importance despite the increasing opportunities and chances of online campaigning. Therefore, there is a clear tendency, especially during the whole current election process, that the freedoms of religion and speech as well as the already abysmal state of religious tolerance in the country are more and more getting undermined.

In this context, the recent killing of Chaudhry Zulfiqar Ali, the chief prosecutor in the Benazir Bhutto case is further overshadowing the final spurt to the ballot boxes. Benazir, who was assassinated after returning from exile to lead her political party PPP in the run-up to the 2008 elections discomfit the potential candidates as well as potential voters regarding the ability of the state to ensure safe elections. Particularly candidates from secular parties are complaining at the Pakistan Election Commission (PEC) about the fact that the government did not provide sufficient security during the election campaigning. Compared to such severe and far reaching challenges, the numerous but minor violations against the election code of conduct, like putting up campaign advertisement on the wrong sides, violation of the provision against the use of public infrastructure by using the wrong size of campaign adds, must sound like 'luxury problems' of the Pakistan Election Commission.

Regarding the actual election itself, there is much concern that the atmosphere of violence and terror could have a significant effect on the voter turnout because potential voters belonging to certain minority groups face higher risks of getting targeted during the balloting. It is argued that this will be mostly on the expense of the secular parties. Furthermore, that people get alienated and disfranchise by the notion of having elections because they feel that their interests are under stress or not represented in the visible political choice offered to them.

The fact that close to 20,000 polling stations are classified as sensitive and around 13,000 as highly sensitive with up to the double amount of security forces shows the high risks of voting for the people in Pakistan. In other words, only around 55 per cent of the more than 73,000 polling stations are afflicted with the nor-

mal risks prevalent in Pakistan's daily life. The decision of the European Union Election Observer Mission (EU EOM) not to send any one of its 110 team members to Balochistan or the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) emphasises the highly risky situation for any person who wants to exercise its right for political participations in any form.

In sum, there is clear evidence that the Pakistani Taliban are trying to undermine the democratic transition of the country. It is argued here that Pakistan's general elections must be seen as a proof for the absolute 'incompatibility' of the Taliban with any democratic norms, values and procedures. This is best expressed in the words of the Pakistani Taliban's leader Hakimullah Mehsud: "We are not in favour of democracy. Democracy is for Jews and Christians". But democratic prospects are not only looking bleak in Taliban infested areas in Pakistan but also much in neighbouring Afghanistan which is heading towards elections in 2014. Here one should emphasize that despite some organizational peculiarities and different goals or attitudes towards international activities (literally the carrying out of terrorist attacks outside South Asia), both the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban are not in favour of democracy. They condemn political parties as well as elections as anti-Islamic, alien concepts. In brief, both Taliban camps are fundamentally anti-democratic in nature.

Therefore, it would be one of the greatest mistakes to believe that there are 'good' or 'moderate' Taliban on any side of the Durand-Line, the unaccepted Afghan-Pakistan border, which can be somehow incorporated into a democratic form of governance. At the moment it seems that the Pakistan general elections 2013 will prove once again that the Taliban are neither able nor willing to accept any democratic norms and values, even not the most basic one of free and fair elections. As long as religious extremists are influencing the public space, undermining political debate, as well as denying the most basic civil and political rights to large parts of the Pakistani people, there will be elections but not democracy in Pakistan.

The writer is a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations as well as a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University



Taliban acted during the election campaigns obviously as the most crucial anti-systemic force. They have been and still are carrying out activities to undermine the democratic process from exercising ad hoc political pressure through blackmailing, death threats or actual application of physical violence. Since early April of this year until today more than 80 people died because of politically motivated militancy in the context of the current elections. It is important to note that this is a rising trend which started in 2007 with the assassination of former Prime Minister and PPP-leader Benazir Bhutto, the Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, and Minority Affairs Minister and Christian Shahbaz Bhatti in 2011, now followed by the killing of sev-

In sum, there are distortions in two directions. The first relates to political parties that promote secularism and liberalism. Especially those political forces that attempt to represent the interests and demands of religious minorities like Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, Ahmadias, Shia's, or those politicians who are working towards the reform of the repressive, human rights violating Blasphemy or anti-Ahmadi laws are getting in the focus of militant Islamists. Being confronted with such a situation, one must state that due to religious extremism the process of aggregation of political interests and concerns regarding important issues like education of female citizenry, minority rights, relations with India are not seri-

the attacks are mainly taking place in Balochistan, FATA and Karachi. In consequence, deemed being 'un-Islamic', secular political parties and their leadership were significantly hampered in exercising their right of freedom of expression, association, information.

This is gaining importance in the election context since, besides the tragic loss of human life and the dramatic experiences of life-threatening situations, the Taliban are remarkably reducing the room to manoeuvre for secular, liberal and left-orientated politicians to operate safely. More concretely, the ANP, MQM, PPP and others parties with similar 'ideological agendas' are getting handicapped by the efforts 'to-get-out-for-votes'. In a developing coun-