

Reappraisal of The Election Scene in Pakistan

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Prologue

In October last, we had carried out a detailed analysis of the 2013 general election scene in Pakistan, identifying the main players and their prospects. Over the last six months many new developments have taken place, which necessitate a reappraisal of the election scene. New alliances have been made, expected tie-ups have not materialised, influential politicians have switched loyalties and parties (sometimes twice or thrice), decisions have been made that could have a critical impact on the way the polls are conducted and the results they throw up. For instance, the delimitation of some seats in Karachi, the complete overhaul of voter lists which have removed some 40 million names and added an almost similar number, and the possibility of expatriate Pakistanis exercising their right to franchise for the first time. Apart from all these new factors, the waxing and waning of political fortunes and prospects over the last six months also requires a reappraisal of the possible scenarios that could emerge after the elections.

A Turning Point?

The 2013 general election in Pakistan has been touted as something of a make-or-break election, one that could well decide the very future of the country. Some analysts have even gone to the extent of calling this election as critical a turning point as the 1970 elections which ultimately served as a catalyst for the break-up of the country and the creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation. At the same time, serious doubts are being expressed on whether or not this election will be able to arrest the inexorable slide of Pakistan towards the edge of the precipice.

If the 2008 general elections ushered in a transition from quasi-military rule to a civilian (or if you will, quasi-democratic) rule, the 2013 general elections are expected to be the first time in Pakistan's history that there is smooth transition from one civilian government to another without the assistance or intervention of a military midwife. At another level, the 2013 poll is expected to usher in 'real change' i.e. not just of faces but of policies and politics and lead to a tectonic shift in the political power structure in the country.

Interestingly, even a couple of weeks before the polling day, the rumour mills are working overtime and speculation remains rife whether elections will be held at all. The sense of uncertainty surrounding the elections has been around now for months,

and fuelling it is a somewhat bizarre series of events that appeared aimed at derailing the electoral process. The sudden appearance of the cleric Tahirul Qadri and his 'dharna' in Islamabad during the course of which the Supreme Court ordered the arrest of Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf in a Rental Power Project scandal, the heat and dust raised by the return of the former military dictator Gen Pervez Musharraf and his hounding by the judiciary, the controversy over the implementation of Article 62 and 63 to vet the nomination papers of candidates and the spike in targeted terror attacks on some political parties are just some of the things that led to persisting doubts about the elections.

It must, however, be said that all the fears that had been expressed over the last many months that the elections could become a casualty to some cataclysmic internal or external development – war, economic bankruptcy and debt default, a spectacular terror attack, political upheaval either as a result of institutional clash or in reaction to political manipulation – have come to nought. Another important factor that goes in favour of elections being held is the sort of ineffectual and uninspiring caretaker government that has been installed. Any postponement of elections with this government remaining in power is extremely unlikely. Apart from the constitutional impediments to either replacing the caretaker government or postponing elections, there is the stiff opposition of the political parties (all charged up in the course of campaigning) that will also have to be taken into account. In all likelihood therefore the polls will take place as scheduled on May 11, although when the next government takes office will depend on the sort of results that the elections throw up.

Factors and New Trends that could determine the Election outcome

Unlike past elections, in which it was relatively easy to predict the result, the 2013 poll are taking place in a much more complex setting. Not only are their new players who have entered the political scene and threaten to shake up the polity, there are also new trends and factors that have emerged which complicate the political setting because of their potential to change the character and complexion of Pakistani politics. Add to this the imponderables and wild cards that play a role in every election and it becomes clear that this election could throw up some rather startling results. The factors that are likely to play a big role are as follows:

- **The Youth Vote:** Around 30% of the voters are in the 18-30 age bracket. Many of them are first-time voters and which way the youth vote swings will be a critical factor in deciding the result of this election. While pundits tend to give a bulk of the youth vote to Imran Khan, other parties like the PMLN have also

been working overtime to attract the youth vote. There are also questions about whether youth voting patterns in urban areas and rural areas will be similar, whether traditional factors like biradaris and group politics will continue to play a role in deciding youth preferences in both urban and rural areas, and most importantly, whether the youth will even come out in big numbers to exercise their franchise.

- **Social Media:** This is another new factor which has been introduced in politics and but how much it actually influences the elections will be known after the results are out. The Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf has been the most active on social media networks and in fact has been dominating the cyberspace. But whether support on facebook and twitter will translate into votes remains to be seen. There is also the question of how many of the young voters in rural and semi-urban areas have access to social media.
- **Rural-Urban divide:** Traditionally, the pattern of voting has been that the bulk of PPP support came from rural areas, while the PMLN dominated in the urban areas. But over the years there has been a demographic transition taking place and there is quite a rural-urban overlap with many erstwhile rural areas either transforming into small towns or getting absorbed into bigger towns. There has also been a shift in population to urban areas. Therefore, will the old rule of thumb analysis of Pakistani politics continue to hold water?
- **Role of Independents:** In the 2008 elections around 20 independent MNA's were elected (excluding the FATA members). Some of these remained independent but the bulk joined either the PPP or PMLN post-election. This time a large number of influential politicians are fighting without any party affiliation. According to some calculations, the number of successful independent candidates could even double and this despite the fact that for the first time political parties are allowed to put up candidates in FATA. At one level, a large number of influential independent candidates jumping into the electoral fray is indicative of the uncertain prospects of the big political parties. At another level, if there are around 30 to 40 independents who get elected, the process of government formation could well become dependent on who is able to woo the most number of independents. Equally important is the fact that number of influential independent candidates is to an extent inversely proportional to the influence and attraction of political parties. In other words, could parties be losing both their hold and attraction for voters

who seem to be gravitating towards locally influential personalities? And what does this trend mean for Pakistani politics?

- **Role of media:** The electronic media is expected to play an important role in this election. While the 24x7 media was present even in 2008, since then there has been a veritable explosion in this sector. Pakistan is probably the only country in the world where news talk shows dominate prime time TV and are more popular than soaps. Talk show anchors are super stars and have become so pivotal in determining the national discourse that a new term 'anchorocracy' has been coined to explain the phenomenal power they wield. Many of these anchors have unabashed right-wing tendencies and, coupled with their rather limited knowledge and even more limited world view, they have tilted the deck against the more centrist, relatively liberal and somewhat progressive parties. Chances are that the influence wielded by the media and its hostility towards the PPP and its allies will manifest itself in the urban areas where cable TV has maximum penetration. If however despite the media the PPP is able to hold its own then the whole perception of media's influence will be called into question.
- **Political alliances and adjustments:** There are really no big alliances between parties all over the country that can make a material difference in the elections. The PPP has managed to seal an alliance with PMLQ but how much this will add strength to the two parties remains uncertain partly because their votes have really proved transferable to each other and partly because the PMLQ less of a party and more of a collection of politicians who are very influential in their home constituency only. On some seats the two parties agreed to disagree and fighting each other, most notably in Gujrat. None of the other major coalition partners of the PPP – namely, MQM and ANP – have entered into a pre-poll alliance with it. Both have however left the door open for a post-poll alliance if the situation so allows and demands. The big challenge for the PPP will be in Sindh where a 10-party alliance of disparate political parties ranging from the PMLN and PMLF to religious parties like JUIF, JUP and Jamaat Islami, and some Sindhi nationalist parties, has been cobbled together against the PPP. But differences and conflicts within this 10-party alliance and the fact that in many constituencies the alliance hasn't managed to agree on a single candidate could work in PPPs favour.

All expectations of a revival of the erstwhile religious parties alliance, MMA, came to nought because of the failure of the Jamaat Islami and JUIF to come together. The big loser in this is likely to be the Jamaat Islami especially after its hopes of tying up with the PTI and PMLN were dashed. Both PTI and PMLN refused to concede the demands of the Jamaat Islami on seats leaving it in the lurch. The PMLN also wasn't able to enter into a seat adjustment with the JUIF in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa despite Maulana Fazlur Rehman's keenness for such an arrangement. The JUIF did manage to adjust some seats with Aftab Sherpao's QWP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but this is more in the nature of local adjustments than anything else. The PMLN not only did not enter into an alliance/adjustment with religious parties, it also ditched Muslim League factions like PML(Likeminded), PML(unification bloc), and PML(Zia). This has created a lot of bad blood because the Unification bloc had propped up the PMLN's minority government in Punjab after the alliance with PPP broke down. How much this leads to a split in the right-wing Muslim League vote remains to be seen. The PMLN however appears confident that its vote bank will not split. What is more, it has calculated that any loss of votes because of renegeing on political commitments to PML(lm), PML(U bloc) and PML(z) will be more than compensated by the distribution of tickets to party loyalists which would help the party keep its flock together. In Balochistan, the PMLN has entered into some understanding with both Baloch and Pashtun nationalists – Akhtar Mengal's BNP and Mehmood Achakzai's PKMAP. But the overtures to Mengal hasn't gone down well with the PMLNs Balochistan unit chief, Sanaullah Zehri, who has accused Mengal in the murder of his son, brother and nephew in a bomb attack. The PMLN could also suffer an attrition of some hardline sunni votes because of the induction of Sheikh Waqas Akram into the party fold. This has angered and alienated the Sunni extremist ASWJ which has pockets of support in a large number of Punjab constituencies which could prove crucial in a closely fought contest.

At the end of the day, however, there is no game-changing alliance which could play a significant role in changing the electoral dynamics. But at the same time, the absence of such alliances means that in many constituencies local alliances and groupings, as well as marginal players commanding 5-7000 votes could tilt the balance either in favour or against a particular party and/or its candidate.

- **Electoral impact of development schemes and welfare programs:** Despite all the charges of bad governance and corruption that have been heaped on the PPP, if the party still thinks it is in with a good chance in the elections it is because of two things: one, the Benazir Income Support Program, under which millions of women from poor families were given Rs 1000 per month; and two, agriculture support prices which led to boom like conditions in rural areas and in a sense turned the terms of trade in favour of agriculture. The beneficiaries of these programs are not the visible and vocal urban middle classes which dominate the media and the market. But they are voters who have traditionally voted PPP. How much their voting decisions are going to be affected by the hostile propaganda against the PPPs governance record remains to be seen. While the PPP also has some far reaching constitutional achievements to its credit, these will not receive much traction in the electoral field.

The PMLN will project its own high profile development projects and welfare programs. For instance the Lahore metro bus service, the free laptops scheme, Danish schools and the yellow cab scheme are some of the projects that will be showcased to project the development-oriented agenda of the PMLN. These projects have received some traction from voters, not just in Punjab but also in other provinces like Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, who would like them to be replicated in their provinces. The important thing about these projects is that they helped the PMLN to recover ground which seemed to have been encroached on by the PTI. But whether these projects will be enough to take the steam out of the PTI's 'tsunami' remains to be seen.

- **Campaign strategy:** The macro-level campaign, both in the media as well as in public meetings, is going to be an important component in both cementing the existing support base and attracting the floating and undecided voter. How much resonance any party's campaign manages to strike with the voter is going to be crucial. The PPP's campaign is almost entire aimed at tugging at the heart-strings of its core voter by projecting the martyrdom of its leaders. There is little in it to attract either the new voter or even the floating voter. The PMLN campaign harks back to past achievements and its development-oriented approach for the future. Despite saying all the right things and highlighting all the problems facing the country today which the PMLN promises to solve, somehow the message of the campaign doesn't really seem to be connecting with the new generation. Imran Khan on the other hand is

talking about issues close to the voters heart and trying to harness the anger and frustration among the people with the current state of affairs. He is managing to exploit the base sentiments of the voter by targeting his rivals, bad-mouthing them, and promising all sort of things to everyone (none of which he is likely to deliver if he sticks to his stand on the issue of terrorism and relations with US). In short, Imran Khan appears to be striking a chord among his targeted audience, something that the others don't seem to be managing very well.

- **Terrorist threats:** One of the big stumbling blocks before the PPP, MQM and ANP in sending out their message to the voters is the manner in which the Taliban are targeting them. The string of attacks on these parties have stymied their public outreach and stifled their campaign. In a sense, this has left the field open for right-wing parties like PMLN, PTI, JUIF, Jamaat Islami etc. There is a good chance that 'out of sight, out of mind' might adversely affect the chances of these three parties at the hustings. On the other hand, there are also signs that a sympathy vote being generated in favour of the parties facing the brunt of attacks by the Taliban terrorists.
- **Perception of winning:** One of the most important determinants in any election is the public perception of who is likely to emerge as the victor. A lot of voters tend to vote in favour of the party which is perceived to be winning. On this count, the PPP suffers a very serious drawback in that hardly anyone is giving it any real chance of forming the next government in the centre. In Sindh, where the perception is that the PPP will form the next government, the party seems to be holding strong. But in rest of the country, the PPP is on a back foot and not seen as being in contention for power. The PMLN on the other hand has gained a lot of ground precisely because of the perception that it is in pole position to win the coming elections. Many people have gravitated to the PMLN because it is seen as the winning party and no one wants to be seen siding with the losing side. The PTI meanwhile is trying to recover its lost momentum and has made a comeback of sorts but whether this is good enough to displace the PMLN remains to be seen.
- **Vote split:** The PPP is banking very strongly on the possibility that a split in the right wing vote will help it sneak through. Implicit in this calculation is the assumption that the PPP vote bank will remain intact while that of its right-wing rivals will split. This might however turn out to be a rather heroic

assumption which doesn't hold on the ground. For one, the PPP voter may not turn up to vote, either because he thinks the party is losing in any case or because he is angry with the party leadership. Second, even if the PPP voter votes, he might vote for some other party, for example the PTI. Third, in many constituencies in Punjab, the votes of the PPP might reach a point where it has a chance to sneak through and win because of a split in the votes of its rivals. It is entirely possible that the victory margins of the winners might be drastically reduced, but the votes they poll might still be far ahead of those polled by the PPP candidate. In any case, depending so much on vote split to win betrays a level of political defeatism that could make the conjecture of defeat into a reality. Finally, the assumption that regardless of the terrible governance record of the PPP and the cavalier attitude of the party leadership towards the workers the party will still get votes might get very badly busted in these elections. In fact, if despite its non-performance the PPP retains its support base, then it will be a shot in the arm for Asif Zardari's cynical politics and will only stall any possible reform in the manner in which the PPP has conducted its politics.

- **Wave factor:** Until now there is no visible wave either in favour or against any political party. This is not to deny considerable anger against the incumbents, especially in the urban areas of Punjab, but this anger doesn't quite seem to be translating into a 'tsunami' in favour of any of the contenders. Of course, there is a possibility that in the din and dust of politics, there could be a subterranean wave that is not discernible but will manifest itself in the results. If this is indeed the case, then there could be a huge upset on May 11.
- **Traditional politics:** If there is no wave, then voting will more or less be along traditional lines. This means that at the constituency level things like strength of candidate, his party affiliation, his development record and his accessibility to voters, the caste and biradaris alliances he is able to sew up, his effectiveness in thana-kutchery politics, and his dharra or group will determine the outcome of the election. If this is the pattern of voting then in Punjab at least the PMLN stands a reasonably good chance of worsting its opponents because it has been working overtime to get this combination right. It also means that the PTI's tsunami will not happen because it is banking heavily upon a complete overhaul and overthrow of the traditional political battle-lines. The PTI has brought in many new and unknown candidates who are not yet adept in the traditional politics and are only

depending upon the passion of its workers and its slogan of 'change' to win support cutting across biradaris, dharras and what have you. A win for the PTI will mark a tectonic shift in Pakistani politics and end the Bhutto (read Left of Centre) versus anti-Bhutto (right-wing, conservative, reactionary) divide that has existed since the late 1960s. But if this doesn't happen then it will mean that the PPP will not be a complete write-off and could return with a respectable number of seats. More importantly, the PPP will remain one of the poles of Pakistani politics.

- **Tickets and candidates:** This is another factor that will have an impact on the results. Heartburn over ticket distribution has already resulted in dissidence within parties and switching of support to rival parties. There have also been cases where an aspiring candidate has rebelled and stood as an independent, thereby eating into the support of the parent party. Candidate selection, with favourites being imposed on some seats, will also impact on the votes polled for a particular party. In close contests, this could mean the difference between victory and defeat. The ability of a party to put up 'electable' candidates is crucial to its electoral prospects. If traditional political dynamics holds, then the winnability of a candidate is one of the most important factors in garnering support at the hustings. On this count, the PTI lags behind both the PMLN and PPP. For that matter, across the country, the PTI has only a handful of 'winnable' candidates. This is precisely the reason why, if the PTI wins, it will only be because it is able to tear apart the traditional model of politics.
- **Turnout:** Political pundits in Pakistan are putting a lot in the store of the turnout in these elections. If the turnout remains around the 40-45% mark, then it is believed that the PMLN will emerge on top. If, however, the turnout rises sharply and crosses the 50-55% mark, then it is expected that Imran Khan's tsunami will sweep everything before it. In any case, if the turnout is around the traditional 40% level, then a hung parliament is the most likely outcome. On the other hand, if the turnout transcends the 50% mark, then chances of a single party (either the PMLN or PTI) getting at least a simple majority is likely. A more than 50% vote could also see the decimation of the PPP.
- **Ideological vacuum:** Notwithstanding the spike in terror attacks on the so-called liberal, progressive and secular parties, this election is in many way

ideology neutral in the sense that politically almost all the parties are clones of each other when it comes to issues like role of Islam, economic model, social and cultural outlook, pro and anti-establishment etc. If the PPP hasn't had the courage to openly confront the rampaging Islamism in society, the PMLN has also diluted its Islamism by reaching out to and wooing liberal sections of society. In other words, over the years, the ideological battle-lines have both got blurred as well as turned on their heads. All mainstream parties have to some extent diluted, even compromised, their ideologies. Wags often say that if it suited him Asif Zardari would even take Tara Masih (Bhutto's hangman) into the PPP! Add to this the shifting of politicians from one to the other party and the ideological lines get further blurred.

- **Role of the establishment:** While the PPP continues to flaunt its anti-establishment credentials, it is the PMLN which has emerged as the anti-establishment party and PPP as a virtual yes-man of the establishment. The Tehrik-e-Insaaf makes revolutionary noises but is being supported by the military establishment, at least tacitly if not openly. At the same time, the military establishment is wary of PTI and sees it as a maverick in Pakistani politics. While the PPP has towed the Army's line faithfully, its governance record hasn't endeared it to the Army. The PMLN spooks the army, which fears that Nawaz Sharif could well try and emulate the Turks and Egyptians to fix the military brass. While the pro-democracy, civilian supremacy and anti-establishment line remains popular with a substantial section of the electorate, from the point of view of realpolitik, it doesn't yield much dividend.

On the issue of whether Pakistan needs to remain a national security state or transform into a welfare state. Although all parties swear by the latter – Imran Khan talks of an Islamic Welfare State and holds up Scandinavian countries as his ideal, the PPP continues to mouth pro-poor and pro-people slogans and the PMLN too is in favour of dismantling the security state and diverting resources to the welfare of people – none of these parties have either a clear plan or program to make the switch and cut the army to size, both in terms of its political role as well as in terms of resource allocation.

- **Role of Islam:** It is now no longer a tussle between secularism (such as it was in the Pakistani context) and Islam because politics has moved so far to the right that talking of secularism is akin to flogging a dead horse. No political

party (except perhaps for MQM) is comfortable with the appellation 'secular' attached to it. The use of labels like liberal, conservative and extremist is essentially in an Islamic and not in a secular context. The PPP's spinelessness against Islamism was on full display in the aftermath of the assassination of the former Punjab governor, Salman Taseer. Rather than confront the supporters of the murderer, the PPP preferred to not make an issue of the assassination so that it didn't suffer any loss of support (by appearing to side with a defender of a blasphemer) or get into the cross-hairs of Islamists. More conservative and Islam-pasand parties like the PMLN, PTI and other political and religious parties either took a very equivocal stand on the assassination, adding a lots of ifs, buts and riders to dilute their condemnation of the incident. In a sense, the Islamists now exercise not only a virtual veto on executive action and parliamentary legislation but also dominate the intellectual discourse and debate in the country and almost all national and provincial parties more or less toe the line set by the Islamists. The issue is no longer about whether Islam will play a role in national life; it is about how intrusive and extensive a role Islam will play.

- **Combating terrorism:** The issue of how to combat religion-driven terrorism and extremism and how to deal with the Taliban will play a role in these elections. The conservative voter is more inclined to an accommodation with the Taliban and other religious extremists, a line which endorsed by the PMLN, PTI and religious parties like Jamaat Islami and JUIF. The PPP, MQM and ANP are however in favour of a more hard approach against the Taliban but are unable to push through with this partly because of a fear of backlash from the Islamists and partly because they are unsure of how far the quasi-Islamist Pakistan Army will back them in any action against the Taliban. Rule of thumb is that the conservative voter will go with parties like PMLN, PTI, Jamaat Islami and JUIF while the more moderate voter will prefer parties like PPP, MQM, and ANP.
- **New voter lists:** The impact of the new voter lists is one of the great unknowns in this election. Nearly 40 million names have been struck off the voter lists and almost the same number added on. There are really no details available on who the new voters. Could it be that people who were excluded under the old lists have now got their votes? Is it the case that in the last elections, it was the fake voters who determined the results? If so, does it mean that manipulation of results will become more difficult this time? It has

been a long standing complaint of the PPP that it has always been robbed of its votes and results have been fixed to deny it an outright victory. If many of the new voters are indeed from the poor and deprived sections, who are also BISP beneficiaries and form the natural vote bank of the PPP – according to one analyst, a lot of the PPP supporters in Sindh for example have for the first time got their names on the voting lists – could this lead to all predictions of PPPs decimation going awry?

- **Overseas voters:** The Supreme Court of Pakistan has been insisting that arrangements be made to allow overseas Pakistanis to cast their votes from the countries where they are residing. If this happens, it will mean millions of additional votes being cast. Most of these votes will be cast in favour of PTI or PMLN, and in closely fought contests could well become the determining factor. The PPP is expected to lose out if the overseas voters are allowed to exercise their franchise.
- **Level playing field:** Perhaps for the first time since 1970, elections are taking place in a setting where at least administratively a level playing field has been provided to all political parties. An independent election commission, a neutral caretaker government in the centre and provinces, and an ostensibly hands-off approach by the military means that the PPP in particular and other parties in general are not going to be hobbled by a hostile administration.
- **Absence of a mascot:** For the first time in its history, the PPP is going into elections without a charismatic leader around whom the party coalesces and is galvanised into action. After ZA Bhutto's death, Benazir Bhutto was always the face of the party. Even after her assassination, the 2008 poll was fought around her personality. But in 2013, there is really no one from the first family who is spearheading the campaign. Asif Zardari cannot participate openly in elections because of a court ruling. In any case, he was hardly the charismatic figure who could galvanise the party jiyalas. His strength lies in court intrigues and working the back rooms. His son and chairman of PPP, Bilawal Bhutto, is being kept away from the heat and dust of the campaign, in large part because of the real and present danger to him from terrorists. Not surprisingly then, there is no spring in the step of the PPPs leaders and a sense of defeat and despondency seems to be afflicting the party, which has even been unable to get its campaign off the ground with only a fortnight left for polling day.

- **Karachi surprise:** Since 1985, politics in Karachi has been dominated by the MQM. For the first time however there are indications that MQMs monopoly on Karachi's politics might be dented badly. For one, the MQM doesn't enjoy the advantage of a sympathetic administration which is willing to look the other way to its strong arm tactics. For another, the media and Election Commission are likely to keep a hawk-eye on voting in Karachi, which will make it difficult for MQM to stuff the ballot boxes with its votes. For a third, over the last couple of years, like the Pakistan army, the MQMs hold on Karachi has been challenged by force of arms. In other words, MQM has lost its monopoly over violence and is getting a taste of its own medicine from rival groups and parties. Having come in the cross-hairs of the Pakistani Taliban, the MQM is for the first time facing the heat at the time of elections. Fourth, the new voting lists and even more importantly, the delimitation of a few seats in Karachi has resulted in reverse-gerrymandering against the MQM. All these factors are likely to impact on the MQMs prospects in Karachi. Chances are that the MQM might still come out on top, but with lesser seats than before. Of course, a caveat is in order here. While the MQM hasn't got a free run in Karachi this time, yet there is also no visible or potent electoral challenge that is confronting the party. This is to say that unlike Punjab where the PTI has emerged as an identifiable challenge for the PMLN, or in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the JUIF, PTI and PMLN are expected to displace the ANP and PPP, in Karachi there is no such visible force threatening the MQM's domination.
- **Balochistan:** The entry of Akhtar Mengal in the electoral fray, coupled with the re-entry of Pashtun nationalist parties like PKMAP is likely to make the Balochistan poll more competitive. For Mengal, participating in the elections was a Hobson's choice: if he boycotted the elections, he would become irrelevant in Balochistan. As it is he was being marginalised by the Baloch militants demanding independence from Pakistan and the only way he could regain his relevance was by fighting the elections. On the other hand, by fighting the elections in defiance of the boycott announced by the militants, Mengal has put his nationalist credentials on the line. If he loses the election, he will be left with no feet to stand on. If he wins, he will have to face the charges of having made a deal with the Pakistani establishment and accusations that he won on the back of the establishment's support. What is more, even if he wins, he is unlikely to have a majority to form a government unless he enters into a coalition, with mainstream parties (which means

compromising on his nationalist demands) or with compromised politicians who work as lackeys of the Pakistani establishment (which will also entail backing down from his nationalist agenda).

- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa:** The verdict in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is likely to be very fragmented. The PTI and JUIF are arguably the front runners. But the PMLN, PPP, QWP and ANP also likely to win a smattering of seats. Chances are that if no one party gets a fairly sizeable number of seats, then government formation will become very difficult, if not impossible because of the stridently hostile positions that have been adopted by many of these parties against each other.

Political and Electoral battle-lines

For nearly three decades now, the PPP and PMLN have constituted the two poles of politics. Even so, politics has become far more variegated, fragmented and splintered between parties which even while espousing similar ideologies and taking similar positions, draw their support from very different sections of society. What is more, new parties and new formations have emerged that could change the political balance. For instance, the PTI of Imran Khan is widely being seen as a major player, some say a third vertex, if not the prime vertex, in the future political makeup in Pakistan.

The religious parties could have formed yet another vertex, if they had managed to coalesce. Individually, however, the religious parties will only be players in some pockets of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and even Punjab. With the shift in the centre of politics to the right, any appeal that the religious parties held at a mass level gets dissipated. Voters tend to favour conservative, right-wing and yet mainstream parties like PMLN and PTI over the candidate of sectarian or religious parties.

Broadly, the political scene in the country on the eve of elections is as follows:

Sindh: The PPP's gambit of keeping the MQM on its side could prove costly for the party, especially in light of the angst caused in its core constituency of rural Sindh by the local government law passed to appease MQM. This gave an opportunity to parties like the PMLF to cobble together an alliance to challenge the PPP in its redoubt of Sindh. Although the PPP scrapped the law within days of the MQM walking out of the alliance and just days before the assemblies were dissolved, the damage had been done. Partly to offset the

possible fallout of the Local Government law, the PPP had roped in some of its most bitter rivals, for instance, the Mahars of Ghotki and the Shirazis of Thatta and even making overtures to former chief minister Arbab Ghulam Rahim. While the tie-up with the Shirazis collapsed on the issue of distribution of tickets, the wooing of these traditional adversaries has riled the party old guard which has been fighting against them for decades. The blurring of the traditional groupings and alliances at the local level that has been caused by these political manoeuvres could disturb the arithmetic that prompted the new alignments.

Asif Zardari's desire to fight the elections in Sindh in alliance with the MQM has come a cropper. This might well be a blessing in disguise for both parties: the MQM will be able to reduce any negative fallout of the anti-incumbency being suffered by the PPP; the PPP on the other hand will limit the erosion in its Sindhi vote bank that would have occurred in the event of a pre-poll alliance with MQM. The PMLN has been trying to make inroads in Sindh and managed to rope in people like Mumtaz Bhutto and a few other nationalists. But this is not expected to change the political dynamics in Sindh very much. The effectiveness of the challenge posed by the somewhat unwieldy and fractious 10 party alliance against the PPP also remains uncertain.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: The PPP seems to be in political disarray in KPK with infighting and a vacuum in leadership at the provincial level. What is more, the relationship between ANP and PPP workers at the grass-roots hasn't quite worked and local PPP leaders have for long been complaining of being ignored by the ANP-led government. The PPP has a huge image problem in KPK, partly because of its poor governance record, partly because it is seen as an American lackey, and partly because of its eroding presence at the local level (the party hardly seems to have any connect with its voters and its political activity remains lethargic and lacklustre).

The ANP's image has also taken a beating (poor governance, rampant corruption etc.). Add to this the fact that the party is unable to campaign freely in the province because of constant and unceasing attacks by the Taliban. While there are some indications of a sympathy vote being cast in favour of ANP which is being admired for its bravery in standing firm in the face of terror attacks, whether this will be enough to overcome the anti-incumbency disadvantage appears a little unlikely.

The PMLN has recovered ground in the Hazara belt, where it had earlier suffered a setback because of infighting and because of the rise of the Hazara province movement as a reaction to PMLN agreeing to the renaming of NWFP as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The PMLN has made some inroads in the Swat region (Malakand division) with the induction of Amir Muqam. But how much difference Muqam can make to PMLNs electoral fortunes in the province remains an open question.

The two parties that are expected to do well in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are PTI and JUIF. Some analysts are in fact predicting a PTI government in the province. But if the verdict is fractured, then there is a good chance of the JUIF, PMLN and QWP forming a coalition in the province.

Punjab: In the Punjab, the PPP and PMLQ have entered into a seat adjustment on most of the seats. Although politically, a tie-up with the PPP seems a big liability in Central and North Punjab, the reason why PMLQ doesn't seem too worried is because it is essentially a party of locally influential people who have the capability of winning their seats on their own strength regardless of their party affiliation. What is more, many of these people will not find any takers in either the PMLN or PTI, the two main contenders in Punjab. In South Punjab, the PPP-PMLQ alliance is arguably better placed, both because of their local alliances and networks as well as because they have been spearheading the demand for bifurcating Punjab and carving a new province in South Punjab.

The PMLN, meanwhile, has decided to go alone in the polls in Punjab. None of its expected alliances or seat adjustments have come through. The big challenge to the PMLN comes from the PTI in central and north Punjab and from the PPP in south Punjab. In order to bolster its presence in South Punjab, the PMLN has endorsed the demand for restoring the Bahawalpur province.

Balochistan: The re-entry of some Baloch nationalists and the Pashtun nationalist PKMAP has heated up the political scene in Balochistan. But chances are that given the unique character of Balochistan politics, a very fragmented verdict is likely to emerge and consequently a government which is a complete mishmash of all sorts of political parties and players.

Likely Results and Post-Election Scenarios

Predicting an election is always a hazardous task, more so under the prevailing conditions and circumstances and given the constellation of political forces and issues that exist in Pakistan. But on the basis of a few clear trends that are emerging, some scenarios can be built. Broadly, there are four or five possible scenarios that appear possible. Some of these will play out in the event of a hung parliament. Others are based on the possibility of an electoral sweep (or at least a simple majority), either by the PTI or the PMLN. Which scenario actually plays out will depend crucially on whether the voting will take place on traditional lines, or whether the electorate will rise above everything else to bring in a government which they think can actually make a difference to their lives and at the same time take the country out of the morass it finds itself in.

The most widely expected outcome is that the PPP is ends up with anything between 50-70 seats; PMLN between 100-120 seats; PTI between 25-50; MQM 18-25; PMLQ 8-12; JUIF 6-10; ANP 5-7; Jamaat Islami 3-5 and the balance by smaller parties. Other variations of such a scenario will take a few seats from one of the parties and add to the tally of another party, without changing the strength and composition of the Assembly in any meaningful way. For instance, the ANP might not be able to even get 5 seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while the JUIF (contesting elections under the flag of MMA, may get around 10-15 seats. Another possibility is that the PPP suffers reverses in Sindh and its overall tally is reduced to around 30-40 seats with PMLF and PMLN (along with some nationalists) winning around a dozen seats in Sindh. Similarly, the PTI could cut into PMLN votes in Central and North Punjab and raise its tally to 70-75 and the PMLN could make up some of this loss at the expense of the PPP in South Punjab and PMLQ in Central Punjab. But these numbers could see a drastic change in the event of a wave either in favour of or against a party manifests itself and/or a fairly large number of independents win the elections (say around 40-50).

Scenario 1: The PMLN gets either a simple majority (137 of the 272 directly elected seats) or is close to it (110-120). This will make the task of government formation relatively easy because the PMLN will be able to cobble together the numbers by entering into a coalition with parties like JUIF, ANP, QWP, PMLF, Independents.

Scenario 2: The PTI is placed in a similar position as the PMLN in scenario 1. Government formation will be a little more complicated for the PTI because of its problems with almost all the other parties. For instance, chances of the ANP, JUIF, Baloch nationalists, and perhaps even the MQM entering into a coalition with Imran

Khan are either non-existent or very slim. Even so, the PTI might be able to rope in independents and some small 1-2 member parties to cross the halfway mark.

Scenario 3: The PPP manages to hold its own and wins around 75-80 seats even as the PTI and PMLN cut into each others' votes and reduce the seats they would have won otherwise. This means that the PMLN isn't able to cross 90 seats and the PTI is limited to around 30-40 seats. In a sense, this is the PPPs best case scenario and offers it a good chance to sneak back into power by forming an unwieldy coalition comprising its earlier allies and winning over new allies using Asif Zardari's considerable skills to cobble together the numbers to just about cross the halfway mark. Such a coalition is unlikely to survive for very long but at least some sort of a government will be formed after the elections.

Scenario 4: This is the nightmare scenario in which the verdict is so fragmented that it is impossible to cobble together any government. Under this scenario, the PPP, PTI and PMLN get enough seats that two of these three have close to a simple majority between them. This will mean that no government will be possible because unless the PPP decides to support the PMLN, no other combination is possible in which two of these three parties will cooperate with each other.

Inherent Instability

In the final analysis, regardless of the results that the next elections throw up, political instability in Pakistan is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. There is every possibility that far from being a panacea, the 2013 elections will prove to be a millstone around the neck of Pakistan. Even if a single party is able to win a simple majority (and if imagination is stretched, win a comfortable majority) it will find running the country very difficult, especially in the face of a strong opposition, rampaging judiciary and restive military, not to mention rampant terrorism, an economy on the verge of collapse, separatism in provinces like Balochistan, ethnic tensions, deteriorating law and order, unstable borders and a host of other things. Add to this the imminent possibility that the government in Islamabad will have to contend with provincial government's being run by opposition parties and the situation becomes even more complicated. It is also important to remember that a PMLN or PTI government in the centre will find legislation difficult for at least the next two years because the Senate will be controlled by the PPP. Therefore, chances are that the results of the 2013 polls will be the start of another scary roller coaster ride, only this time on rails that could give way anytime.