



# Anyone For a Deal?

Voters will be heading for the polls in Pakistan on January 8. But however the ballots are cast, the people will not necessarily decide who will form the next government. Power is at stake, and all the players are calculating how best to retain or acquire it.

**b**RINKMANSHIP IS THE GAME AS POLLING day approaches. Who will take part in the process, on what terms and in alliance with whom? The leaders of two of the main parties, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, both just back from exile, have tough decisions to make. And so does General (recently retired) Pervez Musharraf and more shadowy figures involved in this power play.

Musharraf wants events on election day to appear fair and transparent. But he also wants to make sure that whoever comes to power does so in alliance, rather than in opposition, to him remaining a powerful civilian president. He would be happy if the current ruling party returned to government but he cannot rely on this. His worst outcome

would be for Bhutto or Sharif to command a strong majority – Sharif has pledged to reinstate the judges Musharraf dismissed. Musharraf claimed he felt forced to remove them because they were tying the government's hands in the war against militancy but most believe that the Supreme Court would have declared his re-election as president unconstitutional.

However, the fact that now Sharif, Bhutto and the ruling party are all competing against each other works in Musharraf's favour and makes a fractured outcome more likely than if the two opposition leaders had come to some arrangement.

## EXILES TRIUMPHANT

Sharif's return was engineered by Saudi Arabia – King Abdullah himself said that he would have accompanied him back to Pakistan had he not had prior commitments. This sent a clear message that Saudi Arabia would oppose any attempt to fly him straight out of the country, as happened in September when he last tried to return. And Sharif's triumphant homecoming scuppered American plans for Benazir and Musharraf to share power. Indeed, it also hints at future disagreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia over developments in Pakistan.

At the same time, there are those in the Pakistani establishment who would see the benefits of Sharif's participation in the election. The scale of support witnessed when Bhutto returned appeared to shock many. Sharif's arrival could enable his faction of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), the PML (N) to strike a deal with the current ruling party, the PML (Q), thereby ensuring that Benazir remains sidelined.

Sharif would require some form of payback for this, and it seems plausible that his brother, Shahbaz, will be lined up as the next prime minister. The ruling that no-one may hold that post more than twice does not apply to Shahbaz, who was Chief Minister of the Punjab when his brother was president. For now, both Shahbaz and Nawaz are disqualified from standing. Whatever the truth of the charges against them, their claims that the allegations are politically-motivated are clearly valid. Should the political wind change, the charges will be blown away.

## PRICE AND PROFIT

But although its first priority is to keep out Benazir, the ruling party does not want to give up power easily. The PML (Q) intends another

Chief Minister of the Punjab, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, to take over. It has a number of smaller allies, and has used the benefits of government to create as favourable a playing field as possible. But, if the election were free and fair, the unpopularity of the government seems sure to weigh against it. For most Pakistanis, the key issue is not Islamist militancy, but the price of food.

And beyond that, there is division as to whether the key challenge for Pakistan is militancy, or pandering to US policy.

Food inflation soared to thirteen percent in September year on year. The government claimed that Ramadan had contributed to this. But in October food price inflation rose further, to 14.7 percent. And for many the official figures are



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irrelevant. The price of staple foodstuffs – rice, flour and sugar for instance – has soared over the past year, despite a record wheat harvest.

In each case, the question is not one of scarcity, but profiteering. Pakistan's record wheat harvest came in a year when global prices were high. This encouraged politically-well-connected traders to smuggle wheat to other countries. Similarly, traders and producers of other foodstuffs have deliberately hoarded goods, such as sugar, to push up prices. Political connections have made the government loath to act, instead threatening irrelevantly to increase interest rates to curb price rises.

In such an environment, the ruling party's bullishness would seem misplaced. But the election will not be won or lost on January 8. The military and its allies in the ruling PML (Q) will attempt to determine the result in the run-up to polling and if they fail, then soon after it.

At the last election, in 2002, the main aim was to scupper Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Six Islamic parties were encouraged to run as one, improving their parliamentary position dramatically. Instead of each claiming a small share of the vote, and allowing one of the main parties to win, together their representation improved. Similar seat-sharing arrangements took place throughout the country. Encouraging defections also helped, both before the election and, more significantly, afterwards. Around twenty PPP members were encouraged to defect with the promise of ministerial positions.

These events explain Bhutto's willingness to contest the polls. Politics in Pakistan, as elsewhere, is predicated on gaining access to power. If the PPP fails this time, by 2012 it will have been out of office for sixteen years. If twenty politicians could be encouraged to defect in 2002, how many will switch sides this time? Will the PPP remain a force within Pakistani politics?

## STITCH-UP OR FAIR FIGHT

But given the complexities of the pre- and post-election process by which the government will be decided, Bhutto would understandably rather have returned to power through a stitch-up than a fair fight. A demand that Sharif be allowed back from exile to contest elections was not one of her lines in the sand as she espoused a return to democracy.

But three factors appear to have scuppered

any deal with Musharraf. The first, her politically unastute suggestion that the US be allowed to conduct operations within Pakistan and that Pakistan's nuclear scientist, AQ Khan, be handed to the US for questioning. The second, the huge turn-out that met her on her return. Of particular concern to the PML (Q) was the number of Punjabis who travelled down to Karachi to cheer her. Third, the fact that the Chaudhrys – the political and business family which leads the PML – themselves did not want any deal with Bhutto.

But if Bhutto does return to power, many will believe that the recent bickering between herself and Musharraf has been a facade intended to restore her democratic credentials dented after talk of a deal between herself and the president. Her actions when in power would demonstrate how plausible this is.

## ISLAMIST ALTERNATIVE

Thus the election will do little to change the impression that politics in Pakistan is a back-room game played by a small number of families. The will of the public is less important than the ability to do deals with erstwhile opponents.

What of Islamist militancy? The main claim posted against Musharraf by radical Islamists is that he is a US stooge. And the debate in the US about Pakistan will ensure that whoever is in charge is likely to face exactly the same claim. When US commentators and officials openly discuss whether Musharraf is a spent-force and should be replaced, it provides the munition for clerical sermons. If Musharraf remains in charge, it is because he is the US's man. And if he goes, they will claim, it is because the US wanted him replaced by a more amenable stooge.

The answer for Pakistan is clearly a more accountable democracy, where popular demands for new policy directions can be met within a constitutional framework. Rather than, at present, a system in which Islamist clerics can claim that they represent the only alternative to the political shennanigans in Islamabad. But there's no sign of that coming any time soon.

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