

Pakistan: This mood of hopelessness is contaminating all of us

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Pakistan's electoral process has been stifled by the spectre of suicide bombings and the long shadow of Musharraf

Karachi,

Earlier this month in Pakistan, a popular television show instructed viewers on the proper method of casting a ballot in the coming elections. The programme was the satirical 4 Man Show, and the elections in question are being run by a music channel to determine the people's choice for best VJ. The subtext to the skit was the listlessness surrounding those other elections in Pakistan, scheduled for February 18.

On the streets of Karachi there are few visible signs of campaigning, aside from banners announcing various constituency candidates. But many of those banners have been in place since the run-up to the January 8 elections, which were postponed following Benazir Bhutto's assassination, and the slogans on the Pakistan People's party banners - The Return of Benazir is the Return of Hope - now sound a note of doom.

It's easy to find the reason for the absence of the large-scale rallies that usually characterise campaigns: suicide bombings. It hasn't been just Benazir's rallies - first her homecoming rally on October 18, then the election rally on December 27 - that have been targeted. Over the past weekend, there was a suicide bombing at an Awami National party rally in the volatile North-West Frontier Province, killing 27.

The threat of suicide bombings has almost entirely halted the big rallies, although Asif Zardari relaunched the PPP's campaign on February 9 at a rally of thousands in Thatta, Sindh

province, after the 40-day mourning period for Benazir Bhutto. It's worth mentioning that the few rallies that have been held included one at the weekend for the APDM, the inaccurately named All-Parties Democratic Movement, which is in fact boycotting the elections.

Necessity is opening up other avenues, too: in a move either bizarre or ingenious, the Muttahida Quami Movement, Karachi's most powerful party, whose election symbol is the kite, held a kite-flying festival that attracted large crowds - though it remains in doubt how many people listened to the speeches rather than simply enjoying the kites and music. Largely, though, candidates are using quieter methods, such as door-to-door campaigning and local neighbourhood meetings. Perfectly worthy ways of engaging voters, but entirely lacking in pre-election buzz.

Many Pakistanis have long since stayed away from the election process, believing no government will change their lives of hardship and misery. But this time the mood of hopelessness seems to have extended outward, even to people who live and breathe politics. No political conversation I've heard in the last month has been without the word "allow". As in: "Musharraf won't allow ..."; "the army will never allow ..."; but also "the people won't allow".

This stand-off between what will and won't be allowed is often portrayed as the real decider of election results. So, the argument goes: on the one hand, Musharraf-backed-by-the-army won't allow the two parties that oppose him (the PPP and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) to make up the two-thirds majority in the national assembly necessary to impeach the president and reverse his changes to the constitution. On the other hand, the people of Pakistan - specifically the supporters of the PPP and PML-N - won't allow a result that brings Musharraf's supporters (the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam and the MQM) back into power.

Asif Zardari has openly warned the government of a "severe reaction" in the event of rigging, and his party has made it clear that widespread defeats for the PPP will be seen as evidence of that. So, the chattering classes predict, the PPP will probably emerge as the largest single party

in the National Assembly, followed by the PML-N, but the PML-Q and MQM will also carry a significant number of seats. Interestingly, the most recent polling data suggests this would accurately reflect the parties' actual level of support. It seems possible that the wave of sympathy for the PPP following Benazir's death has been dented by the appointment of the controversial Zardari as party leader. Certainly there's no one who has anything approaching Bhutto's crowd-pulling charisma.

And the party that made the most astonishing gains in the 2002 elections - the religious alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal - is entirely absent from political discussions. One of the main sections of the MMA, the Jamaat-e-Islami, is boycotting the elections; but in addition, support for the MMA in the constituencies it won in 2002 has sharply declined as a result of its failure to deliver on promises after five years in office. However, disturbingly, the fall in its popularity may also signal that some of its supporters have moved further into extremism and now believe in backing or joining those who operate outside the political process.

As for me, I'm going to cast my vote on February 18 to show support for a process which, however flawed, is leagues ahead of any alternative. Who I'll vote for - well, that's a question to which I still don't have an answer.

P.S.

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