

No clear-cut mandate in Pakistani elections

by Susan Maitra

The Nov. 16 National Assembly and the Nov. 19 Provincial Assembly elections in Pakistan have established the Pakistan People's Party as the single largest party in the country, but its majority is not sufficient to form a national government alone.

As of Nov. 23, the PPP and the other major groups are busy wooing the independently elected candidates and winners belonging to the small parties, in an effort to put together an absolute majority. It has been announced that the new prime minister will be named by acting President Ghulam Ishaq Khan in early December. Already, according to the press reports, Ishaq Khan has told the cabinet that PPP leader Benazir Bhutto Zardari should have the first chance to form the government.

In the National Assembly elections, the PPP secured 92 out of 204 seats, falling short of an absolute majority by just 11 seats. The Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI)—the Urdu name for the Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA), which consisted of eight like-minded parties led by the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)—came out a distant second with the 54 seats. Independent candidates, some of whom were backed by the IJI, secured 40 seats and are expected to play a decisive role in the formation of the government.

In the Provincial Assembly elections, neither the IJI nor the PPP came out as outright winners in three out of four provinces. In Sind alone, the PPP secured 67 of 100 seats. In Punjab, Baluchistan, and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), the IJI is holding on to slender majorities and will have to accommodate others to form the provincial governments.

It is difficult to identify any definitive trend in the overall election results, especially since both major parties—the PPP and IJI—campaigns primarily on non-issues. The PPP, which was ousted from power in 1977 by an Army coup and subsequently persecuted by martial law regime, harped on its legitimacy. The IJI, consisting of handpicked cabinet members under the late President Zia ul-Haq, tried to convince the electorate that the PPP was anti-national. Issues such as the Afghan crisis, ethnic tensions, the depleted economy, and the international crisis were not addressed.

Moreover, both the IJI and PPP had put up landlords and their kin in large numbers as candidates. Both had their Islamic credentials to offer. The PPP formed a seat arrangement with the Jamiatul-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI)-Fazlur Group in the

NWFP, and the IJI had the orthodox Jamaat-e-Islami as a dominant force in its alliance. Similarly, both the PPP and IJI refrained from criticizing the Army, which has managed Pakistan's affairs since 1977.

The only clear verdict appeared in Sind Province. Destabilized in 1983 when a pro-secessionist group, Jiye Sind, went on a rampage against the martial law regime, Sind has witnessed intense ethnic violence. In recent years, the province, where the large port city of Karachi is located, has seen a massive influx of drug mafia, armed with Soviet-made Kalashnikov assault rifles.

In Sind, the electorate unambiguously rejected the people in power, namely the IJI, as well as the secessionists of the Sind National Alliance and Sind-Pakhtoon-Baluch Alliance. Instead, the Mohajirs, Urdu-speaking people who migrated to Pakistan following the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and formation of Bangladesh in 1971—have emerged as a very powerful political bloc, particularly in the cities.

Well-organized and with a solid economic base, the Mohajirs had been the backbone of the Muslim League, the party that brought Pakistan into existence. But they became demoralized and disaffected with government as the mafia controlled by the Pathans and Punjabis began to use Sind as their operational base in the 1980s. Mafia operations were behind many of the ethnic riots that the Mohajirs became convinced were deliberately organized to break their economic and institutional hegemony in Sind.

In 1986, the Mohajirs formed their own group, the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM), but did not register it as a political party. In the national election, it was MQM independents who swept Karachi, winning 11 out of 13 seats. The top IJI candidates were blown away in this process: former Prime Minister Mustafa Junejo; IJI chairman and a prospective prime minister Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi; and PML's spiritual leader and political fixer, Pir Ali Mardan Shah of Pagara, all lost decisively.

Acting Chief Minister of Sind and IJI member Akhtar Qazi also lost in the provincial elections.

What's in store?

Despite such mixed-up results, it is most probable that the PPP's Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, will be asked to form a government. There is cautious optimism in the Pakistani media that Bhutto may not continue puffing up the populist image her father and his friends gave to the PPP.

Bhutto has made it a point to acknowledge publicly that both the Army and Islam are important ingredients for Pakistan's security. According to recent reports, she promised the Army brass that if the PPP won, the Army could nominate the next President, as well as the foreign and interior ministers. She has also proposed to create a Supreme Defense Council, in which the Army would have a permanent and decisive constitutional role in policymaking.