

Gathering storm in Pakistan

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After three years of military rule, Pakistani voters have spoken. The message from the Oct. 10 elections is ominous, with immediate implications for U.S. policymakers: For the first time in Pakistan's history, religious parties have won significant popular support. ("Foes of U.S. in Pakistan make unexpected gains," The Chronicle, Oct. 12.)

Muttehidda Majilis-e-Amal -- an electoral alliance of six major religious parties centered around Jamaat-i-Islami -- has won majority of seats in both the North-West Frontier Province and in Baluchistan -- two of Pakistan's four provinces -- as well as 45 seats of 272 available in the country's National Assembly, including seats from the key cities of Islamabad and Karachi.

In every past election in the country, all religious parties combined have never polled more than 8 percent of popular vote, and never have they won more than a few National Assembly seats. "This is a revolution," announced Qazi Hussain Ahmed, chief of Jamaat-i-Islami.

Maybe, but not quite yet -- the ball is in the United States' court. The religious parties' strong showing in the polls is, as a Pakistani newspaper put it, "a snub to pro-American lobbies in Pakistan." Qazi Ahmed has repeatedly told his supporters, "We will not accept American bases and Western civilization." It is likely that a coalition of political parties and independents that will continue the current pro-U.S. policies of President Pervez Musharraf will form the new government in Islamabad.

Nevertheless, the religious parties will form the government in the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan where they have the majority. Both provinces border Afghanistan and deeply resent the continuing U.S. military operations in the area. Culturally and ideologically deeply conservative, these two provinces are also host to many militant jihadi groups active in Pakistan.

If the United States chooses to attack Iraq -- with or without the United Nation's approval -- the consequences for Pakistan will be dire. The religious parties could use their newfound power to defy the government

in Islamabad. Most likely, Musharraf would then use powers, acquired through recently enacted constitutional amendments, to dissolve the elected provincial and, possibly, national legislatures and unleash large-scale political repression.

Traditional secular parties unable to support Musharraf's policies or join hands with religious parties would be paralyzed. The mantle of opposition to an increasingly repressive regime would be taken up by the mullahs at the national scale. The success of religious parties in metropolitan cities such as Islamabad and Karachi is a sign that an anti-American platform, in a country where President Musharraf is often referred to as "Busharraf," has increasingly deep and wide resonance among Pakistanis.

Political unrest in Pakistan, when buttressed by widespread popular protests, has always led either to a military coup or hastily called elections.

Under current circumstances, either of these developments will result in a much greater role, if not outright rule, for reactionary Islamist forces in Islamabad. Pakistan is not Afghanistan, but an Islamist government in Pakistan will exact a heavy price on both people and institutions of the country.

Pakistan's persistent tensions with India, and Pakistan's Islamist parties avowed agenda of 'liberating' Kashmir add further danger to an already precarious region of the world.

A nightmare scenario is in the making. It will be Pakistan's nightmare above all; but, in this globalized world, nations share their pain with others,

especially with those perceived to be supporters of their tormentors. Will Pakistan's future demonstrate again that the United States has learned nothing from the Iranian revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis; the fallout from the blind policy of first using, and then abandoning, dictators like Pakistan's General Zia and fanatics like the Taliban to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan?

The choices before the Bush administration are difficult and stark: Reverse policies that fan anti-American sentiments and provide ammunition to extremist groups in their campaign to impose their bankrupt vision of an Islamic state (which has no roots or precedents in Islamic history) or live in an increasingly polarized and violent world. Policies that do not honor their own principles -- concern for democracy, human rights, social and economic justice,

among others -- will ultimately lack legitimacy with allies, and cannot command respect from adversaries.

Specifically, the United States must avoid the extreme of double standards in its foreign policy, blatantly evident in the administration's blanket support of Israeli policies and actions; stop covert military actions; support and strengthen international institutions; and help in reducing the growing gulf between the haves of the Northern Hemisphere and the have-nots of the Southern Hemisphere.

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