

HFAC MENACA Subcommittee Testimony on Pakistan Elections

March 20, 2024

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, colleagues,

When I was a junior officer in Peshawar, Pakistan 31 years ago, I saw up close a Pakistani election. I saw the election irregularities along with the courage of Pakistani voters who turned up despite threats of violence and intimidation. Three decades ago, it was a contest between Nawaz Sharif, brother of the current Prime Minister, and the late Benazir Bhutto, whose son and husband now lead the Pakistan People's Party.

Today, I propose saying a few words about where the election on February 8 fell short, where we saw positive elements, and what lies ahead for U.S. policy in Pakistan.

Election Irregularities

The day after the elections, the State Department issued a clear statement:

- 1) Noting undue restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.
- 2) Condemning electoral violence and restrictions on human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- 3) Condemning attacks on media workers, and restrictions on access to the internet and telecommunication services.
- 4) Expressing concern about allegations of interference in the electoral process and stating claims of interference or fraud should be fully investigated.

Let me drill down a bit deeper into our observations. We were particularly concerned about electoral abuses and violence that happened in the weeks leading up to the elections. First, there were attacks against police, politicians, and political gatherings by terrorist groups. Second, many journalists, particularly female journalists, were harassed and abused by party supporters. And several

political leaders were disadvantaged by the inability to register specific candidates and political parties.

On the day of the elections, an internationally respected local election monitoring organization said that they were barred from observing vote tabulation in more than half of the constituencies across the country. And despite a high court instruction not to interrupt internet service on election day, authorities shut down mobile data services, the principal means by which Pakistanis access social media and messaging applications.

Progress in Participation

There were positive elements as well in these elections. Despite threats of violence, over 60 million Pakistanis voted, including over 21 million women. Voters elected 50 percent more women to Parliament than they did in 2018. In addition to a record number of women candidates, there were record numbers of members of religious and ethnic minority groups and young people running for seats in Parliament.

Voters in Pakistan had a choice. A range of political parties won seats in national and provincial assemblies. Three different political parties now lead Pakistan's four provinces.

More than 5,000 independent observers were in the field. Their organization's conclusion was that the conduct of the election was largely competitive and orderly, while noting some irregularities in the compilation of results.

U.S. Policy Going Forward

Pakistan is an important partner of the United States. We share a commitment to strengthening Pakistan's democratic institutions, supporting the U.S.-Pakistan Green Alliance Framework, cooperating to counter terrorist threats from groups like al Qa'ida and ISIS, and bolstering respect for human rights, including religious freedom.

Most importantly, the United States plays a critical role in promoting economic stability in Pakistan. We are also the top destination for Pakistan's exports. We have been one of the most important investors in critical infrastructure over the 76 years of our partnership. For example, the U.S. government is refurbishing the

Mangla and Tarbela dams that provide electricity to tens of millions of Pakistanis. Our support for Pakistan over these decades has been in the form of development grants, private sector investment, and humanitarian assistance during periods of greatest need, including the recent catastrophic flooding.

Unfortunately, Pakistan is facing mounting debt challenges after the past decade of elevated borrowing, including from the PRC. This year, nearly 70 percent of the federal government's revenue is expected to go to payments to service this massive debt. Pakistan needs economic reforms and private sector-led investments that will deliver economic growth for the Pakistani people and not dig their government deeper into debt.

Finally, the Pakistani people deserve a country that is peaceful, democratic, and prosperous. We are working every day to support that vision. I thank the subcommittee for its leadership on developing our relations with Pakistan and I pledge to work with the Members of your subcommittee as we execute our policy.

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