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Pakistani voters trounce parties that waged Washington's AfPak war, imposed austerity

By Keith Jones

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Pakistani voters decisively repudiated the country's outgoing Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government, which for five years served as a pliant instrument of US imperialism, extending the AfPak War across northwestern Pakistan and imposing IMF austerity measures.

Official results of Saturday's national and four provincial assembly elections are not expected for several more days. But unofficial partial returns indicate that the PPP's traditional electoral rival, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML (N), will obtain a strong plurality or possibly a majority of the seats in the National Assembly. The PML (N) also retained control over the government of the Punjab, home to 60 percent of Pakistan's 180 million people.

Both Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghan President Hamid Karzai publicly congratulated PML (N) leader Nawaz Sharif on his victory. A right-wing industrialist, Sharif twice before served as Pakistan's prime minister, only to be ousted by the military.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI—Pakistan Movement for Justice) of former cricket star Imran Khan also did well. The PTI had long been an also-ran in Pakistani politics. However, in 2011 Khan began staging rallies denouncing US drone strikes that have killed thousands of civilians

and terrorized Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Khan also vowed to lead a "revolution" to end corruption and create an "Islamic welfare state."

Khan welcomed prominent businessmen and renegade PPP and PML (N) leaders into his party, while making clear that he is eager for Pakistan to retain close relations with Washington. Under conditions where the PPP, Pakistan's main bourgeois "left" party, and its pseudo-left allies deepened the country's alignment with US imperialism, Khan's denunciations of illegal U.S. drone strikes struck a popular chord, especially among urban youth.

The PTI, which hitherto had only ever won a single National Assembly seat, might force the PPP into third place in the National Assembly. It is the largest party in Khyber Pashtunkhwa (KP) province, which adjoins the FATA.

Concerned about the surge in PTI support, Sharif has made limited anti-drone strike statements, announcing that "options" other than "guns and bullets...need to be explored" to end the AfPak war.

The elections represent an historic defeat for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). It won only a handful of National Assembly seats outside rural Sindh, the stronghold of the Bhutto family that leads the PPP, and where the PPP uses Sindhi regionalist appeals and traditional landlord-peasant relations to muster votes.

"The [PPP's] disastrous results," Pakistan's *The News* commented, "have also thrown a huge dark cloud on the prospects of President Asif Ali Zardari (the husband of the late Benazir Bhutto) to run for a second term of office in September, if he is not forced out of office earlier by his opponents who now dominate the political scene."

Previous PPP governments imposed IMF austerity and upheld Pakistan's alliance with Washington, under which Pakistan's military served as a loyal satrap of US imperialism in Asia and the Middle East. In the last five years, this reached a qualitatively new level, with the PPP presiding over an outright neocolonial regime.

It gave Washington carte blanche to rain drone strikes on its people and propped up the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan by waging a brutal counterinsurgency—complete with carpet-bombing and collective punishments—inside Pakistan. Millions of Pakistanis were turned into refugees in their own country.

The PPP and its coalition partners—the Awami National Party (ANP) and the MQM (Muttahida Quami Movement)—offered nothing except more austerity, even as the country was devastated by floods, collapsing infrastructure, power shortages, and rising food prices.

The PPP was compelled to mount a shadow campaign, under threats from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, who are aligned with the Afghan Taliban. It organized few rallies, and its latest dynastic leader, 24-year-old Bilwal Bhutto, took refuge in Dubai.

The ANP, the governing party in KP, suffered if anything an even more ignominious collapse. Incomplete returns show it winning just one National Assembly seat and half a dozen or less of the KP's 99 provincial assembly seats.

The MQM—which openly supported the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf, then backed the PPP after the 2008 elections—apparently was more successful than its partners in holding onto its seats. Notorious for its communal appeals and outright gangsterism, the ethnically based MQM has played a major role in the communal turf wars rocking Karachi, Pakistan's commercial evidence, for years. Its opponents charged that it engaged in large-scale ballot rigging and intimidation during Saturday's vote.

The Election Commission and press claim that despite election-day violence that killed more than twenty people, the use of armed thugs to suppress voting in Karachi, threats from ethnic separatists in Balochistan to attack voters—that is, the fact that the country is largely in a state of civil war—the elections held on Saturday were “fair.”

The reality is that the elections aimed at providing a thin democratic façade for neocolonial rule in Pakistan. The agenda of the new PML (N) government is being worked out in back-channel discussions between Washington, the IMF, and the Pakistani military and business elite.

The head of Pakistan's armed forces, General Kiyani, has met twice with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in recent weeks. Pakistan is a key US partner as the Pentagon discusses scaling back the size of its occupation forces in Afghanistan and reorganizing its puppet regime in Kabul. In one indication of where real power lies in Pakistani bourgeois politics, Kerry invited Kiyani, not civilian officials, to meet with him and Afghan President Karzai last month.

Pakistan's caretaker election-period government has already negotiated the framework for an emergency IMF loan, as Pakistan only has enough foreign exchange reserves for a few weeks' imports. The loan is predicated on pledges to slash energy price subsidies and social spending, raise taxes and accelerate the privatization of state enterprises.

Sharif, who began his political career as a protégé of the US-backed military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq will do Washington's bidding, no less than the PPP's Zardari. US strategist Bruce Riedel, who worked on the Obama administration's AfPak war plans, told the *Washington Post* that Sharif “is a man we can work with; we have worked with him before.”

Sharif has declared that “I'm not someone who is against the IMF.”

Unlike the PTI, the PML (N) spelled out its anti-working class program in some detail. Its election manifesto promised to establish Special Economic Zones, replace price subsidies with means-tested “targeted subsidies” and privatize key state-owned industries like power generation and distribution or the railways.

US President Obama publicly gave his imprimatur to the election results Sunday, cynically declaring them a triumph for democracy. “My Administration,” he said, “looks forward to continuing our cooperation with the Pakistani government that emerges from this election as equal partners.”