

Pakistan's New Frontier

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — The ouster of pro-Taliban Islamist parties in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province has sparked optimism that secular nationalism is replacing religious fanaticism in a troubled corner of the world. But the election results are best viewed as another phase in Pakistan's cyclical politics rather than a revolution in attitudes about Islamic governance. The United States, taking the long view, would be wise to engage both the winners and the losers in the province's new political order. The losers are likely to wield influence in the region again.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) religious alliance that had swept to power in 2002 in the province was roundly crushed this time around, scraping together no more than a few seats in the national assembly and 2% of the popular vote nationwide. Derided by many as corrupt, regressive and incompetent, most of its leaders consequently lost by large margins. In its place, the secular Awami National Party (ANP) regained much of its traditional strength in the region, along with the late Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

As optimists suggest, part of the anti-MMA vote can be attributed to concerns about its ineffectual response to the creeping influence of a new generation of Taliban militants into the so-called "settled" areas of the province. Rifts within the alliance over the extent of its cooperation with the military government further diminished the ability of the religious parties to defend a common platform.

But the MMA's defeat also fits into a broader historical pattern that defies simplistic religious versus secular categorization: Incumbency has always been a major disadvantage. The MMA's undoing was in large part its perceived failure to deliver on education, health and clean government — the same things that brought down its predecessors. That the Islamists raised expectations by promising to be righteous and incorruptible simply reinforced voter disenchantment with their rule.

Since the Northwest Frontier has emerged as the front line in the struggle against Islamic militancy, the political trends we see there should color America's overall approach to post-election Pakistan. While Washington ought to welcome the moderate policies of the ANP and PPP, the religious parties are not a spent force. In the Northwest Frontier Province, they still control 10% of the seats in the provincial assembly — significant, even if off their pre-election high of 50%. And the cyclical nature of politics in the province means these parties are highly likely to regain some of their former influence.

The key to dealing with the religious parties is to continue their integration into the mainstream political process. The good news here is that "democratic Islamists" like the MMA were never quite as dangerous as prophesied. Faced with the stark realities of governance, they watered down their Shariah agenda, crafted a development program that bent to the wishes of international donors, and began more forcefully to disassociate themselves from militancy. One of the governing parties, Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (JUI) moderated so significantly during its five-year tenure that it found itself both criticized from the left for its illiberal Islamism, and out-flanked on the right by the politically rejectionist neo-Taliban.

The trick, then, will be to continue that moderating process even now that such parties are out of power. Close observers of Northwest Frontier politics had for this reason been quietly hoping that JUI would join the new governing coalition as a minor player. Although for now JUI has announced that it won't, that could change in the coming days. Its core leadership is already deeply invested in traditional politics, but it is the party's fringe — scores of young madrassa graduates and disaffected clerics — that needs to be kept engaged. They are the ones who, critically, sit on the blurred boundary between formal politics and militancy.

It is in the interests of Pakistan and the U.S. to see these pragmatic mullahs continue to be co-opted into the formal political process. This means deepening interaction with JUI-affiliated madrassa leaders without appearing to dictate a Western agenda for religious education. And it means selectively engaging the religious parties as interlocutors — flawed as they are — to the militants in the tribal areas.

No one should have any illusions: Islamist discourse and strict Shariah are corrupting to liberal democracy in Pakistan. But the democratic Islamists are not a monolith. They adapt, they compromise, and they absorb a vast pool of young activists who might otherwise turn toward violence. Left alone on the margins, they may more readily adopt a vigorous politics of agitation, protesting progressive social policies and state action against hardline clerics.

This is a particular threat because, despite the MMA's defeat, the broader political winds are still at its back. Anti-Americanism and frustration with the war in Afghanistan remain high. Furthermore, the ANP's secular and pro-Hamid Karzai orientations — both of which are out of step with the broader Pashtun population in the Frontier — are likely to limit its influence in precisely those places that present the greatest governance and security challenges to the Pakistani state.

This election was not so definitive a rejection of religious politics as it might seem. The religious parties are not going away, and now more than ever the U.S. must learn to engage with the entire spectrum of religious and political actors in the Frontier. Sometimes it's the losers who matter most of all.

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