

IRI Pakistan Index

Three Crises: Economic, Political and Security

The most significant event since IRI's last poll was the assassination of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Chairperson and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Its impact on the political landscape has been significant, both as a setback to President Pervez Musharraf as well as a boost to her party's numbers. When asked if they felt that Bhutto's death had weakened the federation, 93 percent agreed. Pakistanis also blamed the government for her death; 62 percent cited it as responsible for her assassination while only 13 percent blamed Al-Qaeda. This indicates a collapse in the government's credibility among its citizens.

Pakistan is also facing economic difficulties; 94 percent agreed that the shortages of wheat, petrol and electricity were serious problems. These bread and butter issues remain the top concern in the minds of Pakistani voters. When presented with a number of issues and asked to select the most important in determining which party they would vote for, 77 percent chose an economy-related issue (inflation, unemployment, poverty and development). Inflation was the top issue, having been selected by 55 percent of the respondents. Voters also indicated a rising concern about their economic well-being.

Also important to voters, is the declining sense of security. Voters expressed concern regarding rising Islamic fundamentalism; 73 percent agreed that religious extremism is a serious problem in Pakistan. Further, 65 percent said that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda operating in the country is also a serious concern. However, only 33 percent of Pakistanis supported the Army fighting extremists in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and tribal areas and just nine percent felt that Pakistan should cooperate with the United States in its war on terror.

Social Indicators

Over the past year IRI polling has tracked a number of indicators in order to gauge the overall mood of the population. In February's poll, these indicators hit all-time highs of pessimism, while optimism dropped to all-time lows.

- When asked about the direction that the country was headed, an all-time high of 84 percent said it was headed in the wrong direction while an all-time low of 15 percent said in the right direction; this represents a 14 point increase in the wrong direction number and an 11 point drop in the right direction number.
- When asked if their personal economic situation improved or worsened in the past year, 13 percent said improved, 72 percent said worsened and 14 percent said that it stayed the same. Again, these numbers represent all-time highs and lows.

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- When asked if they thought that their personal economic situation would improve or worsen over the course of the next year, 20 percent of those interviewed said improve, 48 percent said worsen and 20 percent said stay the same. The 48 percent who responded that their economic condition would worsen represents a 15 point increase since the last poll. Nearly half of the population is pessimistic about their economic future, and economic issues are front and center in the minds of voters.
- The worsening security environment has resulted in higher levels of insecurity; when asked if they felt more secure this year than they did last year, 12 percent said yes and 85 percent said no. This is a 19 point increase in the number of people saying they felt less secure since IRI's last poll.

Leadership Ratings

President Musharraf's political position has severely eroded, with his popularity and approval ratings falling to all-time lows. Since the last poll, he has made a number of moves that should have improved his position, including the ending of the state of emergency, resigning as Army Chief of Staff, assuming office as a civilian president and declaring elections. Whatever bounce he might have received from these actions disappeared in the wake of Bhutto's assassination, the declining security situation and the worsening economy.

- The vast majority of Pakistanis want Musharraf out of office, with 75 percent wanting his resignation and 16 percent opposed; six percent replied maybe. The number calling for his resignation has increased eight points from the last poll.
- Musharraf's job approval rating has hit a new low, with 15 percent saying they approved of the job he was doing and 72 percent saying they disapproved. His approval rating has been cut in half since the last poll, when it was at 30 percent.
- Musharraf's overall popularity has also dropped, with only 16 percent saying they liked him; the number saying they liked him has declined by 12 points since the last survey.
- When Pakistanis were asked which one leader was the best person to handle the country's problems, only eight percent named him this time around; this is a drop of 15 points since the last poll.
- When asked how they would feel about the future of the country if Musharraf resigned, 62 percent of the respondents said very good and another 17 percent said good, for a combined 79 percent.

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- The political and economic crises have also impacted the government's ratings. When asked how the government performed on issues most important to them, 18 percent rated the government positively and 80 percent did not; 52 percent rated the government's performance in the most negative category of very poor. When asked if the ruling coalition had done a good enough job to deserve re-election, 29 percent said yes and 62 percent said no.

In the wake of Bhutto's death, there is a leadership vacuum. For the time being, PPP vice-chair Makhdom Amin Fahim is filling that void. However, Bhutto's husband and current party co-chair Asif Zardari and their son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari both have ratings that make them among the most popular in the country.

- When asked who they would prefer to lead PPP until Bilawal Bhutto Zardari comes of age, 66 percent chose Makhdom Amin Fahim. Fahim was also the choice of 77 percent to be PPP's candidate for prime minister.
- When asked if they liked or disliked various political personalities, 66 percent said they liked Makhdom Amim Fahim, 55 percent said they liked Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, and 37 percent said they liked Zardari. Jailed lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan was liked by 37 percent as well, an increase of 24 percent since the last survey.

Previous IRI polls asked voters to choose the one person they believed could best handle the problems facing Pakistan. In the February survey, this question was open-ended in an attempt to ascertain which leaders were first and foremost in the minds of Pakistanis.

- Makhdom Amin Fahim led the field with 32 percent with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Chair Nawaz Sharif coming in second at 23 percent. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (14 percent), Musharraf (eight percent), and former Chief Minister of Punjab Pervez Elahi (five percent) rounded out the top five.
- In a province-by-province match-up, Nawaz Sharif led the field in Punjab with 31 percent and Makhdom Amin Fahim was number one in Sindh with 57 percent. Nawaz Sharif led in the NWFP with 27 percent, while Bilawal (24 percent) and Makhdom Amin Fahim (20 percent) were first and second in Balochistan.

Elections

As mentioned before, Bhutto's death greatly impacted the political landscape. Nowhere is that more apparent than in questions about the upcoming elections. Her PPP is currently benefiting from both a wave of sympathy as well as a backlash against the government.

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- Interest in the elections remains high. When asked if they were planning on voting, 90 percent of respondents said that they were either very or somewhat likely to vote.
- When asked if they supported the delay in the elections from its original date to February 18, Pakistanis were surprisingly split, with 51 percent saying that they supported the delay while 43 percent opposed.
- However, when they asked why they thought the elections had been delayed, 57 percent said that it was because Musharraf feared that Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) would not win, while 39 percent said that it was due to legitimate security concerns.
- When asked if they would support a postponement of the elections for up to one year, voters were overwhelmingly opposed: 85 percent said they would oppose such a postponement. The idea of President Musharraf resigning and the elections being held under a unity government had the support of 69 percent.
- When asked which party they would vote for, PPP topped the field, garnering 50 percent in the national sample. PML-N was second with 22 percent and PML-Q came in third with 14 percent.
- PPP's wave carried through all of the provinces: in Punjab, PPP led with 44 percent, with PML-N in second at 32 percent and PML-Q a distant third with 19 percent; in Sindh, PPP far outdistanced the field with 74 percent; in NWFP, PPP led with 37 percent, PML-N came in second with 18 percent, and Awami National Party (ANP) in third with 12 percent; in Balochistan, PPP garnered 44 percent, with PML-Q a distant second with 15 percent.
- Regardless of the actual outcome, Pakistanis have already made up their minds that PML-Q should not win. When asked which party would win the most seats if the elections were free and fair, 58 percent responded PPP, 22 percent said PML-N and 13 percent said PML-Q. Further, when asked if they would think that the election was free and fair or rigged in the event that PML-Q was announced to have won the most seats, 79 percent said that they would think that the election was rigged. And when asked if they would support protests against the government in the event that PML-Q was announced as the winner, 55 percent replied yes, indicating a potential for post-election turmoil should that event occur.

The Next Government

IRI's survey also probed different configurations of the next government. With a hung parliament (no party having a clear majority of seats) being a real possibility, it will likely require a partnership of two or more parties in order to form a ruling coalition.

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- When asked if they preferred the Mutehida Qaumi Movement (MQM) to remain partnered with PML-Q or join PPP and PML-N, 58 percent replied PPP/PML-N while 25 percent replied PML-Q.
- IRI's poll also tested potential ruling coalition partnerships. When asked to choose their preference of three potential match-ups, a PML-Q/PML-N coalition received the support of nine percent, while PPP/PML-Q was the choice of 11 percent. Far out in front was a hypothetical PPP/PML-N ruling coalition, with 72 percent selecting it as their choice. PPP voters preferred the PML-N partnership with 89 percent; likewise, PML-N voters preferred the PPP partnership with 88 percent support; PML-Q voters preferred their party partner with PPP (51 percent) rather than PML-N (37 percent).
- When asked to choose their top choice for prime minister, 56 percent opted for PPP's Makhdom Amin Fahim, while 15 percent chose PML-N's Javed Hashmi and 12 percent supported PML-Q's Pervez Elahi.

The Army

The Pakistan Army has long been the most respected institution in the country; in IRI's first few polls its favorability rating was consistently at the 80 percent level. In the last poll, however, the Army's rating dropped to 55 percent. In IRI's February poll, the Army has rebounded somewhat to 65 percent.

When Pakistanis were asked if the performance of Musharraf affected their opinion of the Army, 57 percent said that Musharraf's performance caused them to now have a lower opinion of the Army. This 57 percent represents an increase of 16 points since the last survey, when only 41 percent said that his actions had resulted in a lower opinion of the Army. The fact that the Army's overall approval rating has risen by 10 points since the last survey could be a result of Musharraf's resignation as Army Chief and the assumption of the role by General Pervez Kiyani.

When asked if they liked or disliked various personalities, 25 percent said they liked the new Army Chief; this is an increase of 20 percent since the last survey.

Finally, respondents expressed a desire for the separation of military and state; 69 percent agreed that the Army should not play a role in civilian government.

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