

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the upcoming parliamentary elections in Pakistan. This topic has occupied much of my time and that of the International Republican Institute's time in the last few years. I returned from Islamabad on December 15 and will return there next week in preparation for IRI's election observation mission.

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is actively engaged in programs to support the democratic process in Pakistan, from public opinion polling, work with nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and a political party strengthening program. These activities have been funded through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). With recent funding from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and the U.S. Agency for International Development, IRI has also undertaken a comprehensive elections effort which includes a pre-election assessment, deployment of long-term observers to provincial cities and capitals and fielding of a 65-person international Election Day observer team.

For the October 2002 elections, IRI conducted a get-out-the-vote training effort and a series of pre-election, Election Day and post-election polls to provide feedback to decision makers and other interested parties on voter attitudes on national priorities and towards the political process. In August 2005, IRI observed local government elections in coordination with international and domestic election observers. In September 2005, IRI opened its first office in Pakistan. For the last two years, IRI's focus in Pakistan has been on political party strengthening and public opinion polling.

Our polling has revealed that Pakistanis are committed to democracy and concerned about the future direction of their country. In IRI's February 2007 poll, 81 percent were optimistic that democracy would improve their lives. Over the course of the past year, increasing numbers expressed their desire for the Army to remove itself from civilian government and for President Pervez Musharraf to resign his post as Army Chief of Staff. And even when President Musharraf was at his peak of popularity, strong majorities supported the return of exiled leaders Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in order to contest elections.

Our most recent poll, conducted last month, found that voters overwhelmingly opposed the President's declaration of emergency. This move has polarized the country and split the electorate into two parts. Throughout the poll findings, 25 to 33 percent remained supportive of President Musharraf and were positive about the condition of the country. Seventy-five to 66 percent expressed anger at the current state of affairs and desired change.

When asked if they supported or opposed the declaration of emergency, 26 percent said they supported it while 70 percent said they opposed; 57 percent said that they strongly opposed the measure. Voters were also opposed to the various measures that accompanied the state of emergency declaration. For instance, 71 percent opposed the suspension of the constitution, and 76 percent opposed the closure of TV news channels. Seventy-six percent also opposed the crackdown on lawyers and civil society, and the house arrest of opposition leaders, and 62 percent supported anti-declaration protests.

One day before President Musharraf declared the November state of emergency, an IRI delegation concluded a mission assessing preparations for parliamentary elections. The assessment was conducted with IRI's firm conviction of the need for credible and transparent provincial and national elections.

During the eight-day mission, assessment team members -- from academia, Congressional staff from this committee and international NGOs -- reviewed the technical and political preparation for constitutionally-mandated elections. IRI's assessment team, following one done a few weeks before by our sister organization National Democratic Institute, met with Pakistani government officials and representatives of political parties, civil society and media in Islamabad before deploying to provincial capitals Karachi, Lahore and Quetta. Team members met with national and local leadership of 12 political parties, media and government officials at various levels.

Even with the impending rumors of a declaration of emergency prior to November 3, IRI found a strong commitment on the part of civil society and political parties to engage in democratic elections, even among those who identified a lack of a level playing field in the pre-election environment. Across the board, opposition political parties and the media expressed concern that measures such as an emergency might be declared and elections delayed.

Prior to the emergency, an over-riding concern was the continued decline in law and order within Pakistan. Potential candidates expressed fears about their personal safety while they were electioneering; the media worried about the vulnerability of reporters and cameramen in carrying out their work to bring information to the public. A general feeling of insecurity prevailed among most Pakistanis. The concerns of election period security did not, however, lead the majority of Pakistanis with whom the assessment mission met to concur with governmental decrees to limit or ban political rallies and gatherings.

Questions as to the capacity of the Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to meet electoral needs in a timely and objective manner were often raised with IRI's delegation. A consistent issue of concern was the accuracy of the official voter list and the possible exclusion of eligible voters. In meetings with the commissioner and secretary of the ECP, as well as with provincial election officials, team members were informed of draft codes of conduct and regulation changes such as posting of balloting results. Formalizing and enforcing these draft rules of conduct would have significantly increased confidence in the pre-election preparations.

The ECP and the nation's political parties find it difficult to work together despite numerous attempts by various stakeholders to facilitate regular meetings on issues related to the conduct of the elections. In February 2007, IRI facilitated a one-day roundtable between political parties and the ECP to discuss election preparations. A renewed commitment by the ECP to continue such meetings, irrespective of the timing of elections, is needed, as is the commitment by the political parties to set aside partisan rhetoric and make all attempts to work with the ECP and its provincial branches.

The delegation observed that the return of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto visibly energized her political movement and heard from several camps, not merely those of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, that the return of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif would be necessary to assure the public that elections would be conducted with a fair and transparent intent. His return and freedom of movement about the country is a positive step.

The assessment team noted the needed and integral role played in the pre-election environment by Pakistan's private media. When looking back to 1999, the year during which General Musharraf took power in Pakistan, one notes the paucity of Pakistani media existing to cover the event.

During Musharraf's tenure in office, media outlet numbers have grown tremendously and today they play a vital role in the roadmap to democracy. In IRI's most recent polling, the media is the highest rated institution in the country, far outpacing the government and even the Army. That makes it all the more unfortunate that private television stations were removed from the airwaves in the declaration of emergency. Furthermore, even though the emergency has been lifted, media curbs remain in place. It is essential that they be allowed to broadcast and be given full constitutional freedoms to report.

As IRI publicly stated in its pre-election assessment, the declaration of emergency on November 3, 2007, was a significant obstacle to the restoration of democratic governance in Pakistan. Several individuals who met with IRI during the course of the assessment were or are now under arrest or face the threat of detention. Independent media, seen by the assessment team as one of the positive strengths of the pre-election environment, continues to be censored.

IRI's public opinion research program over two years has clearly proven a consistent Pakistani desire for democratic governance, regardless of which political personality led

in head-to-head, comparison polling. Recent polls also showed that an overwhelming majority, 70 percent, of Pakistanis were opposed to a declaration of emergency.

The government of Pakistan's decision to lift the emergency and proceed with elections in some ways offers hope that the process towards democratization may be restored. However, it is difficult to envision how elections conducted in a matter of only a few days and weeks with many erstwhile participants still under detention will achieve legitimacy in the minds of Pakistani citizens. Ultimately, it is for the Pakistani people to judge this election's credibility and based upon the findings of IRI polling this will be difficult to achieve.

Within IRI, we have examined whether or not our presence as observers is necessary or desirable, given the already obviously flawed conditions in which this election is proceeding. As recently as last week, IRI was in consultations with Pakistani partners and others as to the viability of an observer mission. With the decision of the majority of parties to contest the election, IRI determined that its role, as an NGO promoting democracy, was to work with Pakistani partners on this election in the hopes that future elections can be improved to democratic standards.

In the next few weeks, IRI's long-term and short-term observer delegations will observe Pakistan's electoral process. They will not interject themselves into the process. Observers will be allowed to discuss the election with election officials but will not suggest changes in their behavior that could be interpreted as interference. The delegation will not take partisan positions but will seek input from all those participating in the election. Observers will maintain an independent and impartial posture and abide by all laws pertaining to international observers.

On Election Day, IRI teams will observe the opening of a polling station in their assigned area. They will also observe voting at that station and then voting at approximately seven to 11 other stations in their areas over the course of the day. In addition to observing the voting procedure at each station, the teams will evaluate the presence of political party and civil society poll watchers, voter turnout, adherence to physical regulations for polling stations, conflicts and conflict resolution processes. The teams will be instructed to observe both urban and rural polling stations if possible.

At the end of the day, each IRI team will either return to monitor closing procedures at the polling station where they observed opening procedures or, in the event that a team notices substantial problems at a polling station, to that polling station to observe closing procedures. Following each polling station closing, the IRI teams will observe the counting process. Again, IRI observers will note any conflicts and the conflict resolution processes during the ballot counting and report any urgent issues. Every effort will be made to observe polling stations in a manner consistent with Pakistan's rural and urban demographic spread.

IRI will attempt to field observers in all four provinces of Pakistan, security permitting. Preliminary mission findings will be presented shortly after Election Day at a press

briefing and the delegation will release a statement at IRI's command center in Islamabad. Approximately 45 days later, IRI will issue a comprehensive report assessing the entire election process and making recommendations to strengthen future elections in Pakistan. It is IRI's hope that the recommendations may set benchmarks that serve as a guide for Pakistan election officials, political parties and civil society on how future elections might improve the country's democratic standing.

Much of my comments today have rightly looked to the government's role in election issues. However, a review of history shows the causes of the problems facing Pakistani democracy are widespread among many of those politicians seeking office today.

A commitment by parties to run issue-based, rather than personality-centered, campaigns would hopefully break with the disastrous cycles of elections since 1970.

An important role to play by the parties, which remain personality based, would be to come forward with political programs, or platforms, which will motivate the people of Pakistan to participate in elections when they are held. Again, to look at IRI polling, the issues which predominate are not those concerned with U.S. foreign policy, but on bread and butter issues such as inflation.

When presented with a number of issues and asked to select which was the most important in determining which party they would vote for, 77 percent chose an economy related issue. Inflation was the top issue by far, having been selected by 53 percent of the respondents.

In closing, let me say on behalf of IRI that restoring public, as well as international, confidence in the electoral process will be difficult but the urge among Pakistanis for democracy remains strong. Scholars and political observers frequently identify national elections in 1970 as among the most free and transparent in Pakistan's history. Despite many issues which arose following those elections, it was a benchmark with one of Pakistan's highest turnouts in 60 years. I stress this high turnout because polls show a very high level of interest and intent to participate in the upcoming elections. The government of Pakistan and the ECP should take all efforts humanly possible to transparently address remaining voter list issues and ensure that Pakistanis on Election Day are able to cast their ballot.

Thank you.