After three years of military rule, an elected government is in place in Pakistan. The country’s new prime minister, Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, heads a weak coalition government that could muster just enough support to survive a vote of confidence. While observers said that election-day procedures were for the most part fair, they did not consider the election rules to be entirely free or fair (see box “How fair and free were the Pakistani elections?”).

General Pervez Musharraf, the Chief of Army Staff, continues as the country’s president as the result of an extra-constitutional and controversial referendum with powers to sack the elected assemblies and the federal and provincial governments. And, under his tight control, the federal system seems to be weaker than ever before.

Commenting on the situation, Sanaullah Baloch, a former member of the National Assembly from Balochistan, said that the military has taken everything directly into its own hands and that Pakistan is no longer a federal democratic state. I.A. Rehman, Director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, suggested that “The federal system is being eroded,” and that “The new dispensation is based on unified command – it has failed earlier and it will fail again.” An ongoing tussle between Pakistan’s military leadership and political institutions is what most people predict, and some believe that the new government will not survive beyond a year.

There were many firsts in the elections held on October 10, 2002:
• the number of National Assembly seats was increased to 342 from 217;
• the minimum voting age was reduced to 18 years from 21 years;
• graduation with a bachelor’s degree was made the minimum educational qualification for candidates for the assembly;
• 60 assembly seats were reserved for women; and
• 10 assembly seats were reserved for non-Muslims.

Changing the rules

The Musharraf establishment had made it clear even before the start of the campaign that it would not allow two former prime ministers return to power. One of them, Benazir Bhutto, had been prime minister from 1988 to 1990 and from 1993 to 1996. The other, Nawaz Sharif, was the prime minister who was overthrown by Musharraf. The government decreed that the membership of either Bhutto or Sharif in any political party would disqualify that party from contesting the election. In addition, a new law was enacted stipulating that any person who had served twice as the prime minister or as the chief minister of a province would not be entitled to seek a third term in office.

To avoid disqualification Nawaz Sharif’s party, the Pakistan Muslim League, changed its leadership. Benazir Bhutto’s party, the Pakistan Peoples Party, used another tactic: it registered a party under a slightly different name, the Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians, without Bhutto as a formal member.

A process to undermine these parties also had begun long before the election was called. Breakaway factions had been created and potential winning candidates from the two parties had been coached and coerced to join these factions. Corruption cases had been withdrawn against those politicians who had assured the military government of their support while charges had been laid against some who had dared to reject the offer.

Intimidation and a slim majority

On election day there were widespread complaints of intimidation and vote rigging. But, notwithstanding these interventions, the Musharraf establishment at first failed to form a government of its own choice. So then the horse-trading and arm-twisting began, and, in the end, Jamali managed to form a coalition that would have a slim majority in the Assembly.

The voter turnout was 41 per cent nationwide. A breakaway, pro-Musharraf faction of the erstwhile Pakistan Muslim League, the PML-Q, won 118 seats in the 342-member National Assembly. The successor to Bhutto’s party, on the other hand, won the second-largest representation with 81 seats.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of the election was the success of a religious group, the Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (or MMA). This party is a loose coalition of Muslim religious parties of all shades, which, with 60 seats, has emerged as the third-largest political force in the assembly. These elements had been brought together by some former insiders of the regime with the tacit support of conservative groups strongly opposed to General Musharraf’s pro-West policies. They succeeded in forming a government in the North-West Frontier Province and in becoming a coalition partner in Balochistan.

Under the circumstances, the Musharraf establishment had to depend on smaller groups to form a government to its own taste. The constitution’s “defection clause” was suspended to allow 10 members of the successor to Bhutto’s party to join the coalition. This breakaway faction cast their crucial votes for the election of Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali as prime minister.

A government of breakaway factions

The largest element of Jamali’s coalition government is the PML-Q, the pro-Musharraf faction of the original Pakistan Muslim League. It enjoys the support of four smaller parties and the 10 defectors from the successor to Bhutto’s party. It also received the endorsement of other small groups and parties in the assembly that are not formally part of the coalition.

For many, Jamali’s emergence as the Pakistan Muslim League-Q’s candidate for premiership came as a surprise. He had been chosen because the regime did not want a prime minister from the provinces of Punjab or Sindh. Coming from Balochistan, the least populous province, Jamali has a small power base and so
March. They have threatened country-wide protests if the
government's pro-West policies. Its leaders are demanding
anti-Americanism and religious orthodoxy
among Pakistani civil society.

Anti-Americanism and religious orthodoxy

The opposition religious party is also vociferously challenging
the establishment’s attempts to maintain its centralist control. The
regional parties and groups that had waged a long struggle for
the economic, cultural and social rights of the constituent units
have been swept off the political stage. This has created a
dangerous void in a country where price spirals have put the
employment rate at an all-time high.

The presidency and the parliament are likely to remain on a
war-path. Nawaz Sharif’s former party and the successor to
Bhutto’s party are bitterly opposed to Musharraf because they
attribute their defeat to his actions. Together with the religious
party, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (or MQM) decided to withdraw
its support. It was only with great difficulty that this, the fifth
largest party in the assembly, was manoeuvred back into the
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Pressure on the federation

The federation of Pakistan is under pressure from a variety of
factors. The popular parties that support federalism and the
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opposed to the package of constitutional amendments known
as the Legal Framework Order, which was made a part of the
constitution by the Musharraf government days before the
convening of the National Assembly. In this struggle the
opposition parties have the backing of major elements of
Pakistani civil society.

How fair and free were the
Pakistani elections?

Human Rights Watch (New York City, USA):
“Pakistan’s military government has employed a variety of
legal and political tactics to control the process and outcome of
the elections. Those tactics include constitutional
amendments giving President Musharraf virtually
unfettered powers over parliament and government, and the
revision of electoral procedures that effectively eliminate the
leaders of the two major political parties from participating in
the election.”

International Human Rights Commission (Lahore, Pakistan):
“The International Human Rights Commission (IHRC) while
appreciating the efforts of the Election Commission of
Pakistan observed that the elections 2002 were held in a fair,
free and transparent manner. In its detailed report on
Elections 2002 released here today, the IHRC declared that
these elections were free and fair since the 1970 election in the
history of Pakistan.”

EU Election Observation Mission to Pakistan (Brussels,
Belgium):
“The holding of a general election does not in itself guarantee
the restoration of democracy. The unjustified interference with
electoral arrangements … resulted in serious flaws being
inflicted on the electoral process. Additionally, questions still
remain as to whether or not there will be a full transfer of
power from a military to civilian administration.”

is considered a weak prime minister by many analysts. He does
not have a strong personal following within the ruling coalition.
The Pakistan Muslim League-Q is currently under great strain
as its members feel that they are not being accommodated to
the same extent as members of the smaller coalition groups.
And there are dangers of a split within party ranks.
The fragility of the government can be gauged from the fact
that, shortly after endorsing Jamali as prime minister, the
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