

Pakistan vote is encouraging development

by *The Detroit News*

Demanding that presidential candidates supply their tax returns has become a quadrennial event. Candidates feel violated and resent losing their zone of privacy. To a degree, we can understand this way of thinking.

The parliamentary election in Pakistan is an encouraging sign in a troubled region of the world - free elections judged to be scandal-free.

Jubilant Pakistanis say they have taken their country back from military rule with a shot at restoring constitutional guarantees and due process.

It's an opportunity for the United States to develop policy that deals with Pakistan as a whole, not just with strongman President Pervez Musharraf.

Dealing with a government supported by the people can only help the United States achieve its diplomatic and anti-terror goals in the region.

The new parliament, for example, will likely welcome help - including assistance against terrorists, whose attacks in the run-up to the election killed about 100 people, scaring many from the polls.

Voters favored two political parties with enough seats in parliament to form a ruling coalition - if the two sides can get past their traditional rivalry. The vote repudiates Gen. Pervez Musharraf, although he was not up for re-election. But his political party was trounced, getting fewer than 40 votes in a parliament of 272 members. By extension, Pakistanis also slapped U.S. ties to Musharraf, considered by some to be an American puppet.

Beyond political messages, the two winning parties have plenty of work ahead organizing a government that doesn't disintegrate like those of Pakistan's recent past.

It'll be a challenge. The two groups - the Pakistani People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League - are archrivals. Their respective rank-and-file members "hate each other like a cat hates a dog," said a Pakistani publisher in a post-election report Tuesday.

The PPP is headed by the widower of Benazir Bhutto, the former Pakistani prime minister assassinated Dec. 27. His rival in the PML is another former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif. The two are scheduled to meet Thursday to look for common ground. Without an agreement, it's even possible the PPP could form different coalition that includes Musharraf's weakened party.

Parliament needs a two-thirds majority to impeach Musharraf.

Whatever the outcome, a cleanly run parliament would go a long way toward keeping the country stable. Both the Bhutto and Sharif governments of the past were pocked by corruption that led to unrest.

On Tuesday, U.S. Sen. Joe Biden, D-Delaware, recommended tripling American aid to Pakistan to support the moderate majority that voted, in effect, to end military rule.

"This is an opportunity to move from a policy that has been focused on a personality to one based on an entire people," said the senator, who was in Pakistan as an election observer.

Biden is on to something. Supporting a democratically elected government will both help counter Islamic extremists and allay fears about U.S. intentions in the region.

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