

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Who won the Pakistan election?

*The question has provoked a controversy, and the answer depends on whom you ask.*

If you ask an exiled Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader about the results of the Feb. 26 election in Pakistan, he would swear that General Zia lost. If you ask a Pakistani military man, his answer would be just the opposite. Both are wrong. By all accounts, Zia continues in power by default.

Those who say Zia lost quickly cite the report that only 20% of the population voted, but, as later official reports confirmed, a surprising 53% went to the polls.

The London-based opposition group of erstwhile leaders of the party founded by former Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto and hangers-on, sometimes referred to as the Exiled Pakistan Club of London, congratulated each other for helping to defeat six Pakistani cabinet ministers—a curious claim by those who led a *boycott* of the election!

The claim, it turns out, is but the product of a hasty effort to perpetuate a game of self-delusion that goes much deeper. The fact is that from the luxury of their London flats, paid for by the rental income from their families' large land holdings in Pakistan, the Bhutto family included, the opposition leaders decreed that the election was to be boycotted because, they insisted, General Zia would rig it to favor right-wing mullahs.

Understandably, the election results came to the purveyors of this view as somewhat of a shock. The defeat of six of Zia's closest associates in the cabinet would certainly seem to give the lie to the charge of rigging, as does

the rout of the Jamaat-i-Islami, the Saudi-backed right-wing Islamic religious party. Only 8 of their 60 candidates were elected.

Moreover, all the defeated ministers had campaigned on the country's achievements under Zia's military rule, and particularly the process of Islamization.

Why were the PPP leaders, sitting and debating incessantly, so wrong in their evaluation of the people of Pakistan? And why is the PPP-led Movement for the Restoration of Democracy so thoroughly irrelevant to the country's political dynamics?

The problem with the exiles is that they are much less in contact with Pakistani politics than they are with, say, Soviet, British, or Libyan politics. Some of them are also doing well with U.S. politics. These politicians traded the scene of action in Pakistan for good food, British manners, Libyan money, and the Soviet promise of a break-up of their country! The egregious effects of this kind of deal were compounded by the fact that the PPP leaders have systematically refused to bog themselves down in consideration of a program of development for their country.

Most of the exiled leaders sincerely believe—and impotence is not the *only* reason—that they can get back a piece of the Pakistani pie if the country is dismembered. For that, they surely require Soviet assistance, and there is every indication they are getting it.

The Soviets have set their mouthpieces to howling about the 10 deaths

reported during the Pakistan voting. It is a remarkably low figure, in fact, for the rough-and-tumble politics of a typical developing nation. But that might be hard for the Soviets to understand—when only one candidate is allowed to run for each seat in the Soviet people's dictatorship.

The fact is, the opposition to the Zia military regime has proven itself bankrupt, and that is the message of the people of Pakistan in the recent election. In the process, General Zia's rule has been consolidated, and he is moving ahead to hold provincial elections. He has stated that he will shortly announce the amendment of Bhutto's 1973 Constitution, which will provide him all the power a military leader seeks.

Zia will invite one of the newly elected MPs who, in his opinion, commands the support of the majority in the House, to take over as prime minister and form a council of ministers. Although the text of the constitutional amendment has not yet been made public, it is apparent that as President of the Republic, a title he gained in a previous referendum, General Zia will have the authority to remove any prime minister as he wishes.

After eight years of effort, the man who hanged Z. A. Bhutto has succeeded in legitimizing his regime. That by itself is hardly remarkable; what is striking is the abject failure of those political leaders who have spent the last eight years trying to cash in on their hanged leader's legacy.

What might be more usefully debated is whether the exploiter of the legacy or the legacy itself deserves the blame. It is not irrelevant to note that, with characteristic understatement, the late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is reported to have remarked privately on one occasion that the "Bhutto women" are apolitical.