Transcript Q&A

Pakistan’s General Election: Continuity or Change?

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Question 1:
Declan, you noted a marked deterioration of international confidence toward foreign direct investment in Pakistan. I guess in that context, how significant do you see Premier Li’s recent visit to Islamabad and commitment to bolster bilateral trade and technology partnerships? I guess the party’s manifesto placed a lot of emphasis on large infrastructure projects. Do you see a role evolving for China in that regard?

Declan Walsh:
As a business partner for Pakistan?

Question 1:
As a business partner, financier.

Declan Walsh:
I think the Chinese have been, to some degree, disappointing partners for the Pakistanis in that regard. Pakistan sees China as an important strategic ally, often holds them up – in the political sense – as a counter to the US. It was very interesting when things got particularly bad with the Americans last year, the year before, and Pakistan was having these very sort of public displays of affection with China. I see the rhetoric has changed recently. It used to be that the friendship was ‘higher than the mountains and deeper than the seas’ and now it is ‘an abundant tree filled with exuberant fruits’.

But to be perfectly honest, I don’t know the technical details. I know that Nawaz Sharif did talk to the premier about the possibility of help, for instance, with nuclear power deals. Again, that’s a sort of counter-American move to some degree. And there is this trade relationship. But what Pakistan exports – it exports food products, it exports textiles. China is already a very large textile producer. I’m not sure in those terms what sort of market China can provide.

Question 2:
I’m wondering – any of the panellists can address this – about Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, especially given how the year started, with the big bombings against the Shia community, and the historic links – or at least, what we think, that the
Sharif brothers kind of have allowed them all these years to stay in Punjab provided they don’t really target Punjab. So there is a question here about whether they’re willing to move forward with Laskhar-e-Jhangvi, or can we continue to expect attacks against Shias? I wonder how you see that situation progressing.

**Farzana Shaikh:**

I think it is no secret that some of the close links that Mr Sharif and his party have harboured with Sunni sectarian groups like Laskhar-e-Jhangvi have been very worrisome, to say the least. Of course there was the famous incident of the Punjab law minister who was campaigning in his four-wheel drive with one of the most prominent Sunni sectarian leaders, which caused a great deal of consternation in Pakistan. During the recent elections there were also reports that there had been some seat adjustments in order to allow some Sunni groups to campaign, seat adjustments agreed to by Sharif’s party in the Punjab.

It is difficult. Here again, what we have with Mr Sharif is a sort of Janus-faced policy, if one can call it that. While on the one hand it is true that today many are worried by his party’s close links to some of these groups, way back in the 1990s – as I’m sure Professor Talbot will confirm – his party was also responsible for cracking down on some of these sectarian groups, who in fact issued death threats against him. The anti-terrorist courts during that period were aimed precisely against these groups.

So he’s going to have to come clear on some of these sectarian groups. But I don’t think that at the moment is a priority for him, although of course as we all know parts of southern Punjab are in a terrible state because of sectarian violence. But clearly the party believes and its leaders believe that they can control this, that the bigger problem is out there near Pakistan’s border regions, and unless they can calm those Taliban, the so-called Punjabi Taliban can be handled. They’re not as troublesome.

**Question 3:**

Thank you for three very interesting talks. My question is addressed more to Farzana but I’d be interested to hear what the other speakers think of it. I share your concern with regards to the federation, Farzana – you said it’s a step forward for democracy but possibly a step back for the federation, presumably because there’s not one national Pakistan party as a result of
these elections. But to what extent is this necessarily going to cause tensions? You have the 18th Amendment of 2010, you’ve got a lot more resources being devolved to the provinces, a lot more powers being devolved to the provinces. Let’s not forget that it was under the PPP government that you see the escalation in Baluchistan, even though that was a national party.

**Farzana Shaikh:**

Very good question, and I’m glad you raised the issue of the 18th Amendment, which frankly I consider – and I think many do consider – as one of the most significant achievements of the previous PPP-ruled coalition government.

My point really was to raise the issue of – one can take an optimistic view of this and say, well, yes, we’ve got that 18th Amendment, we have the structures of balance now in place. But that balance is institutional. I’m not at all sure that today, with the absence of a party like the People’s Party – which was really, like I said, a party with a national reach – one can talk across provinces in the way that one could, particularly under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, who both, even though they were Sindhi politicians, were able to transcend their Sindhi constituency and speak to a wider Pakistani public. Certainly my own response would be that there is a risk – it may not materialize, but there is a risk that with the PML now in control, there will be a perception that Punjabi domination is back. Of course, as a historian, we all know that that has caused a great deal of grievances – some of them genuine – among the smaller provinces. That’s really what my main concern, and I think the concern of many others in Pakistan following these elections, have been.

**Ian Talbot:**

If you wanted to take an optimistic spin on this, what you would say is that in order certainly to raise taxes – which is what Nawaz Sharif needs to do – he has to work cooperatively now, post-18th Amendment, with governments in the provinces. He will not be able to achieve his wider economic policy without this kind of cooperation. So in a way, we may not get the same kind of clash between Punjab and the rest which is really what was there in the 1990s, when Nawaz Sharif was very much playing the Punjabi card. It’s really that time, in terms of politics – though obviously the military also, its presence in Punjab, which has led to the ‘Punjabization’ of Pakistan idea coming about.
So if he’s going to succeed, which of course he may not, but if he is going to succeed, then he cannot just pursue Punjab interests post-18th Amendment.

**Question 4:**

I’d like to get back on to this question of drones, if I may. In a world where the risk is coming just as much these days from hubs and nodes of networks rather than from other states, are drones not to be seen, along with special forces, as an obvious counter? I wonder therefore whether Declan is not somewhat optimistic if he thinks there’s a rundown in the use of drones after 2014.

**Declan Walsh:**

I think there is a rundown in the use of drones probably for two reasons. One is that the drones debate has suddenly exploded in the US, ever since the nomination of Brennan, the new CIA chief, back in February – in a remarkable way actually. The Americans seem to have sort of worked on a lot of assumptions about how the drones worked – the American public – and now it’s become a real political issue. There was Obama’s speech last week. I think it shows that they have also domestic reasons to restrict or at least to some degree regulate the use. So far, not very much.

To me it seems there are two issues about the drones. It’s such a big issue in Pakistan and it’s become an issue abroad as well. One is that it seems to me there is an international legal issue about the use of drones which is actually not specific to Pakistan. It’s a debate particularly that has to take place in America and also in Britain and other countries where lethal drone technology has been developed or is about to be deployed. Obviously if President Obama feels he can deploy drones over Pakistan, apparently without Pakistani consent, then other countries such as China may decide they’re going to send drones into Tibet, or we may have the Russians sending drones into Chechnya or indeed across into other countries. They would say to the Americans, well, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander.

In terms of the FATA, however – Pakistan’s tribal belt – I think the drones for all their controversies – and there are very serious controversies – have probably been an effective tactical tool in terms of killing some of these senior Al-Qaeda leaders. But I think now there is an admission on the Americans’ part that that tactical utility is in danger of being outweighed by the impact on public opinion in Pakistan, and the way that drones become an effective
recruiting sergeant for militant groups. There may be diminishing returns setting in rapidly at the moment. As I said earlier, my sense is that they are a tactical military weapon, but sometimes conflicts have shown that they do not end with the use of tactical weapons. They also require talks.

**Question 5:**
Could the speakers maybe tell us a little bit about their views on the political participation of the newly enfranchised, the young? Both about what they are doing and what the implications of that might be for the direction of Pakistan.

**Ian Talbot:**
Obviously much was said before the elections about the youth vote, and all these people were going to be voting for Imran Khan. The youth vote also went to PML-N – it wouldn’t have succeeded in the polls in Punjab without that. So this is where certainly PTI overestimated its potential chances. It assumed that it would be the main beneficiary of these newly enfranchised voters, which wasn’t the case. I think that indicates that we’ve got to not leap from the assumption that politicians who do seem adept at social media – like Imran Khan – are necessarily always going to benefit from younger voters. It may be it’s bread-and-butter issues. The reason why PML-N attracted young voters in Punjab was because it actually offered the prospect of employment, which was a key issue for the young, and had a record in its own provincial governments of some kind of development, including of course giving out laptops as one of its populist measures.

So I think part of the media hype around the elections was that all of these new voters were going to plump for PTI. That’s where the analysts’ failure to assess the outcome stems from.

**Bridget Kendall:**
Do you accept Declan’s analysis then, about Imran Khan’s party becoming the third force in Pakistan’s politics now?

**Ian Talbot:**
Certainly I think a lot will depend in terms of the performance of the government in KP, in terms of the long-term prospects for that force. What you’ve got to remember is that what’s happened in that province of Pakistan
is that each election, over the last few elections, has been anti-incumbency and has been for parties – in 2008 it was the ANP – which promise to deliver peace in a disturbed area. I don’t think it was just the drones issue which won PTI support in KP. It was very much the prospect that they might deliver peace for this area, just as ANP had promised and failed to deliver. So if PTI doesn’t deliver in terms of its provincial government, I think that although it's running PML-N close in lots of constituencies in Punjab as a second party at the moment, it isn't necessarily going to make a breakthrough. It will be made or broken by its performance in government.

So again it's one of these responses – it's too early to tell whether it's going to be a long-term major force. It may be, but that will depend on its performance, I think.

Farzana Shaikh:
About Imran Khan – a few years ago we had the Tehrik-e-Istaqlal, led by Asghar Khan. For those of you too young to remember, he campaigned also on the key issue of corruption, cleaning out politics. It’s the kind of refrain we’ve all heard. Basically, an agenda driven by what I would call the demonization of politics – which is fine if you want to demonize politics and politicians in societies or countries where there are strong institutions, but if you do that in Pakistan you create the kind of vacuum where we have the military that steps in. So there is a difficulty there.

The point here I’m trying to make is that once the Americans go, once drone strikes stop – and eventually, they will have to stop – I wonder what Imran Khan is going to actually pitch his programme on. Because really, he’s not had any broad platform, and that’s where Ian’s point is important – now he’s going to have to deliver on the question of governance, not just on an anti-American crusade. At the moment in Pakistan, where there is this fierce anti-American sentiment, it’s very easy to be swayed by that. But we just have to wait, I think, now. We have to wait at least until after 2014, until the proper end of this parliament’s term, to decide where Imran Khan goes. At the moment he could go the way of Asghar Khan and the Tehrik-e-Istaqlal some years ago.

Declan Walsh:
If I could just add, as a sort of qualifying point to my earlier enthusiasm for these elections, one of the most dispiriting things actually during the
campaign was related to Imran Khan and the frontier, and Nawaz Sharif. When these Taliban attacks were taking place, targeting secular parties – including Imran Khan’s and Nawaz Sharif’s electoral opponents in KP province – they were either silent or very mealy-mouthed in terms of these attacks. It just seems that, politics aside, that was really a pretty appalling thing on a human level, and on a political level also quite disturbing. It sort of betrays the ambiguity within some of these conservative parties about how to deal with the Taliban. It seems to me that if you cannot come out and say that it is absolutely unacceptable that an armed group is assassinating members of other people in the same process, it’s a worrisome sign for democracy.

**Question 6:**
What does the election reveal about the role of the media? Declan hasn’t answered your question, Ms Kendall, in terms of throwing light on his own situation.

**Declan Walsh:**
In terms of my own situation, just for those who probably don’t know, I’ve been based in Pakistan for nine years, and just three days before the election I got a letter from the government, from the interior minister, saying that my visa was being cancelled with immediate effect due to my undesirable activities, and that I had to leave within three days. So I left on the night of the elections. The situation is that as a newspaper we have sought to, I suppose, get a definition of what undesirable activities are, try to get a reason for the cancellation of the visa and to have the decision rescinded. Thus far we have been unsuccessful – hence I’m here. On the issue of the media –

**Bridget Kendall:**
Come on, what do you think the undesirable activities were?

**Declan Walsh:**
I mean, clearly it could be that we’ve written stories that made people in the establishment unhappy. It could equally be connected to broader issues between Pakistan and the US, or it could be a combination of all of the above. Who knows. We don’t know.
The media story in Pakistan is that obviously the diversity and vibrancy of the media and all the things we’ve been talking about for years continue. They did jump a little bit on the Imran Khan bandwagon in the last days of the campaign; then again, so did a lot of the Western media, so they can hardly be blamed for that.

The more serious thing is actually about the dangers to journalists, particularly in provincial Pakistan. There’s a great report that’s just come out by the Committee to Protect Journalists which details how 42 journalists have died in the course of their work over the last decade in Pakistan. It’s one of the highest tolls in the world. So far not a single one of those cases has, much less been prosecuted, even made it to court, which is a sign of the impunity that the people who target journalists – and they come from across the board. They come from the security services, they come from political parties in the main cities, they come from militant groups. I think that is a very worrisome sign for our Pakistani colleagues.

**Question 7:**
Pervez Musharraf seems to have mistimed his attempt to re-enter Pakistani politics. What do the panel think will happen to him now?

**Ian Talbot:**
He’s saying today that he wants to face all these charges, but it’s possible that he might – perhaps with Saudi assistance – leave the country. Because in a way the whole Musharraf episode now is a massive distraction and the potential for conflict between a newly elected government and the military, when there are far more important issues at stake in Pakistan. We’ve heard all the problems about the economy and electricity supply. Musharraf is anachronistic, and in many senses rather than Nawaz Sharif trying to make an example of him – much as he may wish to do so, and strike a blow for democracy – it may be wiser to keep his powder dry for perhaps future conflicts with the military which are more significant than over this. So it’s not inconceivable that some kind of compromise agreement might ultimately come about.

Obviously if the supreme court orders the government to bring forward the treason charge against Musharraf, Nawaz Sharif will not want to start off his prime ministership by being in contempt of court. He’s already seen PPP prime ministers’ problems in terms of falling foul of that, so he will bring that
case forward. But that may not be the outcome. He may not be asked to do that.

So it's an issue which potentially could cause all kinds of problems, because although Nawaz Sharif has always made it clear that he separates Pervez Musharraf from the army hierarchy – in terms of Kargil, for example, and the Kargil episode – Musharraf is linked in with the Kargil episode and the commission of inquiry into Kargil could open up all kinds of cans of worms, as indeed could a treason charge against Musharraf being brought.

Farzana Shaikh:

Yes, this is going to be a very Pakistani way of handling Musharraf. I think what we're likely to see, I could be proved wrong, is possibly some sort of – I mean, obviously the military don't want him there, and I think now it's pretty much in the public domain that the military leadership tried hard to prevail on Mr Musharraf not to return to Pakistan, but of course he did so. So the military now have this huge embarrassment.

They are likely to find a way out. Musharraf's mother is said to be ill. He's supposed to have suffered a few palpitations of his own. They will find medical grounds to make us all believe he needs treatment in Dubai. So I wouldn't be surprised if he were made to leave.

But I think more importantly, the whole question of whether or not Sharif wants to take on the military on this issue is an important one. I don't think he is prepared to do that, because I think he wants to reserve his energies for bigger battles. Kayani himself has made it very clear that he's going to brook no disagreement on this issue.

But as concerns the courts, I also believe that the courts know where the redlines are with the military. We do talk about a hyperactive judiciary, I know. We talk about an independent judiciary. But in Pakistan everybody knows who is top dog, and that includes the courts. We've had a series of charges against Mr Musharraf in recent weeks being withdrawn by lawyers – whether under duress, death threats from unknown people, or whether or not they simply said this potato is too hot to handle. But the point is, the message has gone out that the military will take a very dim view of any charges being pursued against Mr Musharraf. I think the courts have heard it. I can't really see the courts moving to order Sharif's government to take action against Musharraf.
Declan Walsh:
I don’t have much to add to that. I think that’s all correct. Except to say that really it always befuddled me – it seemed to me it was in nobody’s interest for Pervez Musharraf to return to Pakistan and it’s really in nobody’s interest for him to stay, apart from his own. So I suspect he will effect an exit.

Bridget Kendall:
That’s where we’re going to bring this to a close. I feel I must apologize for my colleague for leaving us with an empty chair but I think you’ll all agree that on this occasion, although no doubt he would have had very interesting things to say, we didn’t really miss the BBC, because we had three very excellent speakers who not only gave us a broad overview of a very complex subject but went into some very fascinating detail on many aspects. Although, of course, there is much more to say and I’ve no doubt that Chatham House will be hosting another meeting on Pakistan before long, because if there’s one thing that everyone seems agreed on in the panel, it’s that it is too early to say quite what conclusions we will make about this new government. Thank you very much for coming. Thank you for your questions, and join me in thanking the panel.