
After The Mullahs

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THE moustaches have ousted the beards. While Parliament met this week in Islamabad to debate who should be prime minister nationally, at the provincial level in the North West Frontier (NWFP), a deal has been done. Later this month, the Awami National Party (ANP), a secular Pushtun outfit, will take over the provincial government from the Islamist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic parties. It will do so in coalition with the Pakistan People's Party of the assassinated former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, with which it signed a provincial power-sharing agreement on March 5th. The takeover is the result of Pakistan's recent election, at which the ANP increased its representation from a mere seven to 46 of the province's 99 constituencies. The Islamic alliance, half of which boycotted the poll, won just 14.

The result proved that Pushtuns "are neither extremists nor terrorists", crowed the ANP's sturdy leader, Asfandyar Wali Khan. George Bush hailed it as "a part of the victory on the war on terror"—understandable, perhaps, given that the mullahs had been voted out. But a junior American official was probably nearer the mark when he noted that the vote had not vindicated American policy but "repudiated the MMA government". The clerics had failed to curb terrorism, were tainted by their support for the country's discredited president, Pervez Musharraf, and were chaotic administrators. They had risen to power in NWFP, and shared it in Baluchistan, boosted by outrage at America's invasion of Afghanistan. They departed fatter and richer.

The new government is taking over one of the world's hardest-to-govern places. Last month a suicide-bomber killed 44 people at the funeral of a policeman in Swat. This week another suicide-bomber attacked a police station in the district. A third killed 43 people at a gathering of tribal elders at the town of Darra Adam Khel. Militants backed by al-Qaeda have expanded their insurgency from the lawless border areas near Afghanistan into the province's more settled parts. To make matters worse, the provincial government is taking over while the army's counter-insurgency operations are struggling, local-government institutions have atrophied after a year of upheaval and when the national government is being dogged by doubts over its durability even before it has been founded.

The ANP's leading members are descendants of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the so-called "frontier Gandhi" who opposed British rule. The Americans hope their ties with the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, will lead to more cross-border co-operation. But their links to Afghanistan and to India's Congress party make some Pakistanis suspicious of them. The designation of Mr Wali Khan's 37-year-old nephew, Haider Hoti, as chief minister has revived grumbles that the party treats politics as private family business.

The party wants to change the province's colonial-era name to Pukhtunkhwa and says it will reform the administrative system both in the province itself and in adjoining tribal areas, which the provincial governor, Owais Ahmad Ghani, recently described as "weak, demoralised and despondent". In Waziristan, local and foreign jihadists have demolished a fragile administration by murdering scores of pro-government tribal elders. The party will face stiff resistance to its plan to revoke a colonial-era parliamentary act that banned political parties from the tribal areas and left the field open to the mullahs.

The party, whose stronghold is the vale of Peshawar, also secured seats in Swat, to the north, where the army has mounted big operations against jihadists. But the mullahs' former chief minister, Akram Durrani, says that the ANP lacks sufficient clout in the tribal areas and restive southern districts of NWFP to secure a peace.

Though the Americans have backed it, the ANP has been ambivalent about the global "war on terror" and has criticised Pakistan's involvement. "The Taliban is a reality and has assumed the shape of a party and we have to talk with them," says Mr Hoti. Such pledges may revive previous American worries about local peace deals with militants.

Aftab Sherpao, a Pushtun and former interior minister under Mr Musharraf, argues that any secular government would be an improvement "as the MMA had obstructed operations against militants". He survived two recent suicide attacks that killed 75 people. Dozens of ANP supporters were also killed when suicide bombers attacked at election rallies. Mere survival will be an achievement for Mr Wali Khan's clan.

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