

## Chapter 3

# The Campaign and the Media

### The Campaign

Following the announcement of the election date by the President on 5 November, the Election Commission issued an Election Schedule on 15 December 1996. It was at this point that the campaign formally began, although in fact campaigning had been under way from the point at which the President dissolved the National Assembly.

At the end of Chapter 1 we noted several issues which commanded public attention following the calling of the elections:

- the controversy over the dissolution;
- the allegations that the President and the Caretaker Government were working for a preferred outcome to the general election;
- the argument over the timing of the general election;
- the debate about the vigour with which 'accountability' was being pursued by the Caretaker Government; and
- the row over the establishment of the CDNS.

We were struck that at the time of our arrival in Pakistan these and related matters continued to command substantial attention, at least as much as any of the particular policy proposals of the contesting parties. It appeared to us that the political issues in Pakistan above all concern government and governance itself. We were also impressed by the fact that the role of the President and the Caretaker Government was central to each of the major controversies.

A number of those we met remarked that this election campaign was somewhat subdued and the public reaction unenthusiastic, even indifferent, an impression confirmed by our own observations even as late as the final week before polling.

There were three ready explanations for this: it was taking place during Ramzan (when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset), during the winter season when the weather is often bad in much of the country, and at a time of considerable public cynicism regarding the honesty and effectiveness of the leaders of the major parties. In addition, it was suggested to us by one national party Secretary-General that increasingly political campaigning in Pakistan took place on and through television, as in much of the rest of the world, rather than on the streets.

The momentum of the campaign was also partly affected by various new restrictions referred to in the previous chapter, which were grouped together for the guidance of political parties and contesting candidates in a Code of Conduct produced by the Election Commission (attached at *Annex XIV*). As long as the parties adhered to these the effect was bound to be to make the campaign more muted than campaigns preceding previous general elections. There were restrictions, for instance, on party 'processions', the siting of 'election camps', the location of public meetings and rallies, the use of posters, banners, graffiti, flags, loudspeakers (banned except at election meetings) and microphones (restrictions on hours and the number of microphones). There are powerful arguments for these restrictions. At the same time, they probably do have the effect of draining the campaign of a certain amount of colour and vitality which hitherto must have heightened popular interest.

Two further factors which may have contributed to the low-key nature of the campaign were the restrictions on election expenditure and the uncertainty created by the challenges from the PPP and others in the Supreme Court against the dismissal of the Bhutto Government and the dissolution of the National Assembly.

The Court ruled on the validity of the relevant amendment to the Constitution on 12 January 1997, saying unanimously that the Amendment was 'a valid piece of legislation ... that would stay in the Constitution unless removed by Parliament'. However, it was not until 29 January that it ruled by a majority verdict on further petitions challenging the actual decision. After a



*Rallying point ... all the major parties held public rallies during the campaign, some of which drew massive crowds. This meeting took place in Rawalpindi and was addressed by PML(N) leader Nawaz Sharif*

13-day hearing six of the seven judges upheld eight of the President's nine grounds. On the ninth, which related to the alleged murder of Murtaza Bhutto, they stated no view since the matter was *sub judice*. The last legal hurdle to the holding of the elections was therefore only removed five days before polling day.

For all this, the campaign did pick up as time went on. Party workers were active in door-to-door canvassing throughout the country, and the media (see below) gave substantial attention to the elections, both in their news coverage and by means of special Election Commission public information, both in printed and electronic form.

The party leaders addressed some massive rallies – several of our teams quoted estimated attendances of 60,000 at rallies they attended – which were often colourful and entertaining. In the case of one MQM(A) rally attended by our Observers, the speech of leader Altaf Hussain (who lives in Britain) was made by telephone and broadcast via the public address system. Widespread use was made of banners, balloons, kites, stickers, singing, drumming, dancing and fire crackers and imaginative and unconventional techniques were used by some candidates to attract the crowds.

A Provincial Assembly candidate in Rawalpindi paraded three caged lions through the streets to advertise his event. Some of the bigger rallies also attracted the (peaceful) attention of other parties, with the PML(J) distributing bundles of leaflets from a light aircraft over at least one rally organised by the PML(N).

By the end of the campaign, in the urban areas at least, while there was not exactly an 'election fever' very few people could have been unaware that a general election was due to be held on 3 February.

Although there were a number of incidents the campaign period was largely peaceful and the atmosphere generally calm. The major exception was Lahore, where a powerful bomb exploded on Saturday 18 January killing 25 people including the intended victim, the leader of the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). However, the bomb and subsequent counter-violence was not directly related to the elections but was part of a long-standing sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims, respectively the SSP and a Shia group known as the TNFJ.

In Karachi, where there has been considerable violence in the past, there was tension in some areas but no serious disturbances, thanks largely to the deployment of considerable numbers of troops and police, especially as polling day approached. The police and government authorities had developed security plans for every district in the country and identified 'sensitive areas' which received special attention from the security forces even before election day. In some areas effective preventative action was taken when campaign violence was feared.

In Rawalpindi, for instance, party rallies were banned on 31 January when police intelligence reports indicated that there would be trouble from rival groups of party supporters. Elsewhere, however, our Observers noted that even when the major party leaders held rallies on the same day and in the same cities, and even when their supporters' convoys crossed paths, there were no serious clashes.

Adherence to the provisions of the Code of Conduct was mixed. Some of our teams observed breaches. But in general the parties seem to have observed the law regarding the use of loudspeakers, flags, banners and so on. In Lahore, our Observers were told that the penalties for breaches of the Code had proved to be a powerful incentive in favour of compliance. In several places our Observers were told that while the provisions of the Code may have helped to make it a dull campaign they had also reduced the likelihood of violence.

It was more difficult for our Observers to tell whether spending limits were being respected. Several parties claimed that their opponents were breaking the rules in this respect, and some of our teams were told of the distribution by other candidates of Eid gift packets (oil, flour, etc.) in an attempt to influence voters. A number of our Observers were told that major employers – industrialists and 'feudal' landowners alike – were attempting to influence their employees' voting choices.

Parties also sometimes alleged that the local administration was favouring one party or another. In Faisalabad, for instance, it was alleged that the district administration had allowed one party's speeches to be broadcast via a public address system but prevented the broadcast of speeches by another party. In Sindh, it was alleged that the caretaker Chief Minister was using provincial resources to campaign on behalf of his son. However, we were not able to obtain independent and direct evidence to verify any of these charges.

The campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, to which the universal franchise had been extended for the first time, differed in a number of respects from that in the rest of the country. There were no political parties in the contests in these areas and, in line with the determination of male community leaders that women voters should not exercise their right to vote, the candidates' campaigns often ignored even those women voters who had registered.

In general the parties and candidates told us that they were free to campaign. The major exception was the MQM(A), which from the very start to the very end of the campaign period complained that its candidates faced attacks from MQM(H), which they alleged received support from the state, and that there were several parts of Karachi which for them were 'no-go areas'. Five such areas were frequently referred to by their spokesmen: Landhi, Korangi, Malir, Shah Faisal and Lines Area.

The party had boycotted the 1993 National Assembly elections for similar reasons. On this occasion it decided to participate, 'because of the pressure of the masses'. But it protested loudly that the authorities were not only doing nothing to protect its right to campaign but actually wished 'to maintain' such no-go areas in the hope that this would diminish the MQM(A)'s vote.

Officials in the affected areas were keen to reject these charges and to demonstrate that the MQM(A)'s candidates were being given the opportunity to campaign, on one occasion eagerly showing our Observers in Karachi the party's loudspeaker permits. Our Observers in Hyderabad also heard complaints from the MQM(A), for instance that supporters and candidates had been abducted and that the police had been removing the party's kite symbol from buildings.

A complaint of a different nature was made by a minority candidate encountered by one of our Observer teams. He acknowledged that he was free to campaign, but with the whole country as the constituency in the minority election the costs were crippling and effectively ruled out all candidates except those with major financial backing.

As for the content of the campaign, the two major parties attacked each other's record and



*Snap visit ... Commonwealth Observer Group Chairperson Malcolm Fraser and Dr Siteke Mtwale examine election materials held at an Election Commission office prior to distribution to some of Pakistan's 36,451 polling stations*

argued that they alone had the required qualities to be effective in government. Each promised to restore the fortunes of the country.

Mr Sharif vowed to launch a *jihad* (holy war) against 'lawlessness, injustice, and poverty' if he was elected. His party's manifesto promised to tighten fiscal policy, root out corruption, strengthen the power of Parliament and the rule of law, and implement a wide-ranging social action plan to improve literacy and health care.

In its election manifesto the PPP vowed to lead Pakistan down the road to 'stable democracy'. It undertook to implement a strict anti-corruption policy and renew policies that were being implemented during the term of office that had come to an end the previous November. It also promised to establish programmes for health care, women's rights, education, defence and the environment.

Tehrik-e-Insaf pledged to slash the size of government, raise salaries, end poverty, control prices and bring economic prosperity to the country. Above all it promised to take tough action against corruption. Imran Khan reportedly told a rally in Peshawar that "given a chance I can purge the society (of corruption) within two weeks" and that "my party will hang all those who have plundered the national wealth".

It is worth noting that a number of parties once again had 'seat adjustment formulae', under which they agreed not to contest certain seats. For instance, the PML(N) had an agreement with JUP (Niazi) – an Islamic party which had won three seats in 1990 and had been part of the Islamic Jamhoori Mahaz (IJM) which won four in 1993 – according to which the former agreed to the inclusion of the Islamic Rule of Government in its manifesto. Similarly, it was reported that there was a 'no opposition' arrangement between the PML(J) and the PPP in certain seats.

The contesting parties were not the only parties to campaign during this period. Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest of the parties which had decided not to participate in the elections, launched a campaign of house-to-house canvassing to persuade voters not to vote – on the grounds that, as its leader Qazi Hussain Ahmad put it, holding the elections without calling into account the "plunderers of the national exchequer" would be a futile exercise.

At one point during the campaign Benazir Bhutto indicated that her party was "seriously considering" boycotting the polls. Later the position shifted. She was quoted as saying on 7

January 1997 that "we are not going to accept the results of the election if we do not win and if the administration is not neutral." She was further quoted on 31 January as having said the day before that if the PML(N) won over 60 seats in the National Assembly the PPP would conclude that the polls had been rigged.

On 1 February, Ms Bhutto wrote to the Chief Election Commissioner saying that 'since the beginning of the current election campaign we have consistently identified the intention of some quarters, led by President Farooq Leghari, to keep the Pakistan People's Party out of power through unfair means.' She drew attention to a list of 65 National Assembly seats 'where election results are to be engineered/manipulated', urged the Commissioner to 'ensure there is no stuffing of ballot boxes, bogus voting or manipulation of election results' and added that 'since November 5 the PPP has been denied a level playing field'.

The campaign, by common consent not the most exciting in Pakistan's history and described by *The News* as 'cheerless', came to an end as it had begun: with cries of foul.

### The Media

The media are important to the democratic process, especially during an election period. Unfettered access to the media being one of the principal means by which political parties are able to put across to the public their views and debate the issues, we looked closely at the various media in Pakistan, especially the radio and television programmes of the state-owned Pakistan TV Corporation (PTV) and Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC).

### The Print Media

There are more than 2,000 newspapers, magazines and journals, largely in Urdu, but also in English and in the regional languages. Since press freedom was restored with the return to democracy in 1988, they have pursued their own editorial policies. At least one newspaper is owned by the Government, others are party newspapers, but the majority of them are owned by private publishers many of whose political sympathies are reflected in their editorial columns. From the newspapers and magazines in both Urdu and English that we monitored, we were convinced that most shades of political opinion were expressed freely, even if they were rarely



*Above the snow line ... election officials at Murree collecting ballot boxes and other essential election materials. In places the snow was several feet deep but preparations went ahead regardless*

expressed in the pages of a single newspaper, and that readers often entered into a lively debate on political issues and personalities through the letters columns.

We noted, too, that many newspapers shared a bewilderment over what this fourth general election in eight years meant in terms of the political and constitutional future of the nation. For the most part, they reported factually on the important events, such as the Supreme Court's decision of 29 January upholding the President's dismissal of Ms Bhutto's government. Their news columns contained a selection of news and interviews, whose theme was largely dependent on the newspaper's political leanings. Many of their columnists were already analysing the long-term effect of the constant political upheavals. They blamed one party or personality, or indeed the Caretaker Government, and many asked what needed to be done to bring political stability to the country – showing that the media at least were aware that Pakistan needed more than just a continuation of its existing political process.

Unfortunately, newspapers only reach the section of the population which is literate and Pakistan's literacy rate stands at a national average of 38.8 per cent (dropping to 23.5 per cent for females). We were told that in the rural areas the average dropped to about 27 per cent. This meant that the majority of voters had to rely on radio, and to a lesser extent television, for general information on the elections and the various issues – a senior PBC official told us that radio broadcasts reached 95 per cent of the population.

### *Radio and Television*

PTV and PBC are state-owned and subject to government control in their programme content. The Election Commission told us that after the date for the elections was announced and recognising the importance of radio and television, it met the Information Secretary and the heads of PTV and PBC and urged them to be fair in allocating airtime to the political parties. Although no written guidelines were issued, both PTV and PBC undertook, as they had in the previous elections in 1993, to provide equitable news coverage of the major political parties and to give them a single half-hour slot, free, before the elections to put their views across. In addition, and for the first time, they allowed parties to buy party political broadcast time at Rs50,000 per minute on television, including at prime time, on either side of the major 9 p.m. news programme, *Khabarnama*, and during the commercial breaks.

Also as in 1993, a special programme, *Election Hour*, was put on every night after *Khabarnama*. Political leaders of the bigger parties (defined as having fielded candidates for more than five per cent of the National Assembly seats) were given their free half-hour on *Election Hour* and were also invited to submit themselves to being interviewed on this programme. Women's groups, academics, political analysts and representatives of minorities were also invited to form various discussion panels and engaged in lively verbal jousting. The leaders of the PML(N), Mr Sharif, and the PPP, Ms Bhutto, appeared on *Election Hour* in the last days of the campaign, with Ms Bhutto appearing on the last day of campaigning, Saturday 1 February. They, and leaders of other parties contesting the elections, also submitted themselves to some tough questioning on the programme by journalists about their policies, their past performance in government and themselves, and the exchanges were lively. These interviews and discussions were simultaneously broadcast on radio, thus extending their reach.

The paid party political broadcasts were also imaginatively produced, with shots of leaders speaking to enthusiastic crowds or footage taken from moments of triumph when they were in government, cutting away to economic charts or tables either lauding their own economic achievements when they were in power or denigrating the performance of their opponents when they had been in government. In other words, they were no different from such paid broadcasts anywhere else in the world and introduced the element of 'advertising sell' in the elections. Some of these paid broadcasts were used to advertise coming interviews with party leaders. Given that the banning of posters and banners had robbed these elections of the festive air that is usual (and beloved) of Pakistan elections, the party political broadcast was a new and exciting element to those voters who watched television.

The parties used the new broadcast arrangements with enthusiasm. Both the PML(N) and PPP asked to buy extra airtime for their leaders on *Election Hour*, with the PML(N) reportedly paying Rs1.7 million for the extra 34 minutes used by Mr Sharif and the PPP Rs1.25 million for

the extra 25 minutes used by Ms Bhutto. There were some complaints that Mr Sharif had been allowed to select the journalists who would interview him on *Election Hour*. Just before the elections, the Tehrik-e-Insaf complained that a scheduled appearance of Imran Khan on the *Mizan* programme was cancelled with a few hours' notice on 29 January and insisted that this was due to pressure from the Caretaker Government.

In their news programmes, PTV and PBC generally took care to project the campaigns of the major political parties as equitably as possible. Both the rallies, meetings and activities of the PML(N) and PPP were broadcast prominently and equitably and, after Tehrik-e-Insaf complained that it was not being given equal treatment, its leader was also given prominent treatment. The activities of the other parties were also covered.

### *Coverage of the Caretaker Government*

The Caretaker Government took a far higher media profile in the weeks of the campaign than did its counterpart in 1993. Criticism by the PPP of its dismissal by the President, the PPP's petition to the Supreme Court against that decision, and the Court's judgment only five days before the elections to uphold the President's decision meant that the Caretaker Government was constantly in the news defending the President's decision by further elaborating his reasons for the dismissal. The various Ordinances promulgated by the President, many of them concerning fundamental economic and administration restructuring, also meant that the Caretaker Government's actions were also reported and commented on by the media.

The Caretaker Government thus became a perhaps inadvertent player in the campaign period, because it was often the target of criticism by political parties and went to the media to explain or defend itself. PTV and PBC, being state-owned, felt themselves under obligation to give the President and the Caretaker Prime Minister and his Cabinet wide coverage. The President's press conferences or interviews were telecast verbatim (for up to two-and-a-half hours) while edited-down versions were broadcast over radio. The PPP in particular complained that these televised press conferences were a constant attack on itself and a blatant misuse of the electronic media. The situation was compounded two days before the elections when PTV recorded an interview by Zee-TV, an Indian television channel, with the Information Minister in which he criticised the PPP government and offered personal comment on Ms Bhutto herself. This was telecast for domestic viewers.

We felt that without the seemingly pro-active profile of the Caretaker Government, media coverage of the campaign was generally fair and equitable.

**SUGGESTION:** We felt that the independence of the government-owned and controlled media is of great importance to a democratic system and that some mechanism, such as an independent commission, should be considered which would guide state-owned TV and radio: such a mechanism would be independent of government direction and control.