

Different dates for Pakistan polls, but Musharraf election certain

Two Pakistani ministers have announced different dates for the country's general elections, but said that President Pervez Musharraf would be re-elected by the present legislatures in September-October next year.

There was no official word on it, nor was there any reaction from political parties that have been clamouring for the polls.

The ministers rejected media queries that their announcements were prompted by the recent threat of economic sanctions by the European Union (EU).

While Minister for Sports Mian Shamim Haider said Wednesday that the general elections would be held in November 2007, Tariq Azim, state minister for information and broadcasting, a junior but high profile minister, said the polls would be held on January 15, 2008.

'The next general elections will be held in November 2007. However, before that the house will re-elect Musharraf president for another five-year term. The president is likely to be re-elected in the month of October 2007,' Haider was quoted in The News.

The Daily Times and other newspapers carried the dates announced by Azim, but none appeared to point out the discrepancy in dates between the two announcements.

Either way, the announcements appeared to be signals to political contenders and also the West whose governments have been demanding restoration of democracy.

But there is a clear catch in Musharraf's re-election bid. The current legislatures, both federal and provincial, had elected him once earlier.

This is a contentious issue with not only the politicians, but also legal and constitutional experts, who question whether a legislature can re-elect the head of state in its single tenure.

But this is in keeping with Musharraf's repeated hints that he would seek a second term in the presidency and also decide when he, the Army Chief since 1998, would hang his uniform.

He has argued that the country needs him in the dual role.

Both Haider and Azim told media that Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, the banker-turned-politician, would be the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid)'s candidate for the prime minister's post.

Musharraf has preferred Aziz, a political lightweight, to the seniors in Muslim League politics.

Pakistan's top politicians live abroad in exile - two former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, who have been striving to forge an alliance since May this year, and Altaf Hussain, chief of the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM).

Musharraf has said that Bhutto and Sharif cannot contest the forthcoming elections.

Haider said there was no bar on Bhutto's or Hussain's return home to contest the elections or head the campaign of their respective parties. 'These political leaders, however, would have to face legal battles on their return home.' However, he said Sharif's case was different as he left the country after reaching a deal with the government.

Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) has said it was ready to contest elections under Musharraf. The party's Secretary-General Raja Pervez Ashraf said: 'We will contest the elections at any cost and not leave the field open.'

Also on alert will be other parties, especially Muttahida Majlis-E-Amal (MMA), the principal Islamist alliance that has been threatening its lawmakers will resign from the legislatures, en masse, to prevent Musharraf's re-election gambit.

Since he captured power in a military coup in 1998, Musharraf has been criticised in the West for denying democracy to his people. The polls in 2002 did not convince the critics and US President George W. Bush publicly pleaded during his brief visit in March this year.

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