

INTERNATIONAL

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US cautious about polls, expats upbeat

Wajid Ali Syed

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The United States has said that it has been monitoring developments closely as millions of Pakistanis cast their votes in the general elections. Just hours before the polling commenced, a State Department spokesperson told The News that the US supports “free, fair, transparent and accountable elections in Pakistan, as we do around the world; and we encourage Pakistanis to peacefully exercise their democratic right to vote.”

The State Department also remained cautious as it spoke only twice about the Pakistani elections in the last almost two months. In May, the department spokesperson Heather Nauert expressed hope that Pakistan’s electoral reforms passed last year would help facilitate the peaceful transfer of power to a democratically elected civilian government.

During a press briefing she had said that the US along with other international partners supported Pakistan’s implementation of its historic 2017 electoral reforms law. “My understanding is that this is the first time that law will actually be put into effect for these elections. We hope that the new comprehensive and transparent legal framework facilitates the peaceful transfer of civilian power to a democratically elected government,” she emphasized.

Last week, the department also expressed concerns over the participation of individuals affiliated with banned organisations. “We have repeatedly expressed our concerns to the Pakistani government about LeT, including the participation of LeT-affiliated individuals in the elections,” a statement issued last week read. Citing violent and bloody incidents that took place during the election campaign the department had said, “these attacks on political candidates and their supporters are cowardly attempts to deprive the Pakistani people of their democratic rights.”

Similar concerns were also raised by policy experts, observers and analysts. Mariam Mufti, Assistant Professor at the University of Waterloo, called “the election arrangements, strange” saying that “corrupt Nawaz Sharif is not allowed to run, but known terrorist parties and individuals are on the field.” Addressing an event on Pakistan’s election she remarked that real contest would take place in Punjab, where a significant chunk of undecided voter could determine the results.

“It’s troubling that there has been such a steady drumbeat of troubling developments: Arrests of ruling party members, jail sentences of PML-N leaders announced so soon before the election,

dozens of parliamentarians switching parties, crackdowns on media outlets perceived as giving too much attention to a particularly political party,” says Michael Kugelman, senior Associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center here.

Commenting on any possible change in Pakistan US relations after the elections, Michael was of the view that the election was unlikely to have an impact and the relationship will remain strained no matter who leads the new government. “The election is not seen as having a major impact for the US, given that the army will continue to be the main arbiter of policy toward the US,” he said.

CATO Institute’s Visiting Research Fellow Sahar Khan believes that a decisive lead for any party was difficult and the country could end up with a coalition government. The next government, she says would have to face economic and other tax related crucial issues. Other experts wondered if the country was ready to deal with international financial institutions to take it out of growing crisis.

William Milam, former US ambassador to Islamabad, appreciated the fact that the country was experiencing electoral transition for the second consecutive time but feared that not much would change on the ground in terms of economics and politics. He posed his worry saying the impression was that the military has been assuming more power and involved in mainstreaming extremists as political parties.

The Trump administration also maintained that it supports international organisations that participated as observers. On the other hand, most of the American media outlets reviewed the situation in articles and opinion pieces saying that the polls have been overshadowed by terrorist attacks, hundreds of arrests and accusations of interference in the process and crackdown on media along with controversy over militant groups’ electoral participation. CNN highlighted in its report that the election “comes amid growing fears of renewed political instability in Pakistan as it faces multi-billion dollar debt crisis and tilts away from the West towards China.”

Meanwhile, Pakistani diaspora seemed split depending on their political affiliations and age group. A handful of affluent Pakistani-Americans organised election parties either at their residences or restaurants.

Television sets were tuned into different Pakistani channels announcing continuous commentary. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf sympathizers in the Springfield, Virginia set up a meet and greet event. “We had a similar get together in last elections as well,” said Khalid Tanveer, an entrepreneur and one of the organizers of the event, adding “We could not go to Pakistan to fully participate in the electoral process, but we have been on the phones calling our relatives and family members to convince them to vote.”

Tanveer’s friend Zafar Iqbal, a local businessman, commented that he’s missing out on the election fever back home, so he wants catching up on that energy. “Bringing members of the community under one roof to watch election results together is quite festive in its own right,” said Junaid Bashir, a real estate agent in the Virginia area.

“We have also planned to hire traditional musicians and dholwalas as well for after party fun,” he said.