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**PAKISTANI ELECTIONS PROVIDE A GENUINE OPPORTUNITY FOR  
VOTERS TO EXPRESS THEIR WILL, DESPITE SERIOUS FLAWS**

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN – Despite a seriously flawed and difficult pre-election environment, the February 18, 2008, general elections in Pakistan have provided a genuine opportunity for Pakistani voters to express their will, a U.S. delegation to observe the elections led by former Congressman Jim Moody announced today in a preliminary statement. A relatively peaceful Election Day defied widespread expectations of violence, and fears of systematic manipulation appear to have been blunted.

To date, there appears to be broad acceptance of the results. Overall, these elections represent a potentially historic step forward in the democratic process. However, the serious assault on Pakistan's constitutional order and fundamental flaws in the pre-election environment prevented the election from meeting international standards and must be addressed if progress toward a democratic Pakistan is to continue.

Based on Democracy International's engagement with the political process in Pakistan over the past year and the findings of other international and domestic observers, the delegation concluded that the political environment leading up to the election presented serious obstacles to a fully democratic election. The political environment in the year preceding the election, including restrictions on lawyers and judges and on fundamental rights, has not been conducive to an open and robust democratic election.

***Significant challenges in the pre-election context.*** The declaration of emergency rule by President Musharraf on November 3—only two months before the scheduled vote—severely constrained political activities, banned political rallies, shut down media outlets, removed and detained judges, and jailed thousands of lawyers and civil society activists and effectively suspended some of Pakistan's constitution. Violence, including the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, also strongly tainted the pre-election environment. In addition, an ambitious effort to completely rebuild Pakistan's electoral rolls before these elections met with mixed results.

***Election Day conducted in accordance with established procedures, despite problems.*** The balloting and counting processes on Election Day were largely conducted in accordance with established procedures. The Election Day process was executed smoothly in observed polling stations compared to previous Pakistani elections. Despite the relative success of Election Day, the delegation noted some significant systemic problems, including inaccurate voter lists, limited voter turnout and low participation of women. In addition, observers noted procedural irregularities that should be resolved to improve the overall process.

*Democracy International fielded a 38-person U.S. election observation mission to the February 18 elections that included noted experts in election administration, election monitoring and Pakistani politics. In addition to its own short-term observation, the delegation drew upon the work of Democracy International in Pakistan over the past year as well as on the findings of domestic observers. The mission complemented ongoing international and domestic efforts to strengthen democratic electoral systems and processes in Pakistan to help build a more participatory, representative and accountable democracy.*

*Democracy International, based in Bethesda, Maryland, designs, evaluates, implements, and provides technical assistance for democracy and governance programs worldwide. Founded by leading experts in international democracy assistance, DI offers expertise in election processes and election monitoring, political party development, legislative strengthening, local government and decentralization, civil society development, and strategic communications programming. Over the past 20 years, DI and its principals have worked with civil society and election monitoring organizations, election commissions, government agencies and others in more than 50 countries and in every region of the world. DI principal Eric Bjornlund is author of *Beyond Free and Fair: Monitoring Elections and Building Democracy* (Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).*