

MUSHARRAF'S PARTY PROJECTED TO LOSE-BADLY

Let's see if these results last after they count the vote, but it looks like Musharraf's party lost today's election—resoundingly.

From unofficial results the private news channel, Aaj Television, forecast that the Pakistan Peoples Party would win 110 seats in the 272-seat National Assembly, with Mr. Sharif's party taking 100 seats.

Mr. Musharraf's party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Q, was crushed, holding on to just 20 to 30 seats. Early results released by the state news agency, The Associated Press of Pakistan, also showed the Pakistan Peoples Party to be leading in the number of seats won.

The Election Commission of Pakistan declared the elections free and fair and said the polling passed relatively peacefully, despite some irregularities and scattered violence. Ten people were killed and 70 injured around the country, including one candidate who was shot in Lahore on the night before the vote, Pakistani news channels reported.

Fearful of violence and deterred by confusion at polling stations, voters did not turn out in large numbers. Yet fears from opposition parties that the government would try to rig the elections did not materialize, as the early losses showed.

If it's true that Musharraf's government didn't (or didn't succeed in) rigging the elections, score one for democracy. But that doesn't mean the US is prepared to deal with the

aftermath—even if, as projected, Bhutto’s party the PPP comes out ahead.

The results opened a host of new challenges for the Bush administration, which has been criticized in Congress and by Pakistan analysts for relying too heavily on Mr. Musharraf. Even as Mr. Musharraf’s standing plummeted and the insurgency gained strength, senior Bush administration officials praised Mr. Musharraf as a valued partner in the effort against terrorism.

The NYT, at least, makes it sound as if Musharraf is ready to pack it in.

Two politicians close to Mr. Musharraf have said in the past week that the president was well aware of the drift in the country against him and they suggested that he would not remain in office if the new government was in direct opposition to him. “He does not have the fire in the belly for another fight,” said one member of his party. He added that Mr. Musharraf was building a house for himself in Islamabad and would be ready soon to move.

What will Dick Cheney do without his faithful puppet?