



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

Polarisation at the Polls: Pakistan's Fragmented Election Outcome

Author

Deependra Singh Hooda

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Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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Author

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM & Bar, Senior Fellow for Military Strategy, Delhi Policy Group

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Cover Photographs:

Two bomb blasts outside the offices of election candidates in Pishin and Qilla Saifullah in Baluchistan killed 28 and injured over 50 people on February 7, 2024. Source: Arab News

Supporters of PTI and other parties protest outside the office of a Returning Officer in Quetta on February 9, 2024, against the alleged rigging in Pakistan's national election results. Source: Dawn

PPP Chairman Asif Ali Zardari met PMLN President Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif at Bilawal House, in Lahore on February 11, 2024. Source: X/@president_pmln

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Contents

Introduction	1
Events Preceding the Elections	1
Unpacking the Poll Verdict.....	2
Conclusion.....	4

Polarisation at the Polls: Pakistan's Fragmented Election Outcome

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Introduction

As Pakistani citizens lined up at the polling stations on February 8 to vote in the national and provincial elections, mobile and internet services were suspended throughout the country. The caretaker government said that the decision had been taken for security reasons after two bomb blasts targeted election offices and killed at least 28 people in Balochistan on the eve of the polls.

There was an unprecedented delay in announcing the election results. Pakistan's election commission put down the delay due to an "internet issue," but concerns were raised that vote-rigging was taking place. Official election results were finally announced on February 11. Independent candidates, mostly affiliated with Imran Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) won 102 seats. The Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz party (PML-N), headed by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, came in second with 73 seats, and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 54 seats.

With no party able to win the necessary 169 seats to have a majority in parliament, frantic negotiations are on to whip up a coalition government. However, whichever combination comes to power, the results have thrown up some conclusions that will influence the country's future political landscape. In analysing these conclusions, looking at the run-up to the elections is also essential.

Events Preceding the Elections

In April 2022, Prime Minister Imran Khan was removed from office by a vote of no confidence by a coalition of PML-N, PPP and other smaller parties under the banner of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM). In January 2023, in a bid to force early general elections, PTI prematurely dissolved the provincial assemblies in Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, where it was in power. On 10 August 2023, the National Assembly was dissolved by President Arif Alvi on the advice of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, setting the stage for the February 2024 elections.

Imran's popularity, particularly among the youth, remained high despite his removal from office. On May 9, following Imran Khan's arrest by paramilitary troops from the Islamabad High Court, his supporters took to the streets. In the

violence that followed, there were unprecedented attacks on military establishments, including the Pakistan Army General Headquarters in Rawalpindi and the Lahore Corps Commander's residence.

Shaken by these attacks, the army turned firmly against Imran. The May 9 violence also provided an opportunity for the beleaguered government to launch a massive clampdown on PTI supporters. Almost the entire PTI leadership was arrested, including Vice Chairman Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Secretary General Asad Umar, Fawad Chaudhry, Shireen Mazari, Ali Muhammad Khan, and Ejaz Chaudhry.

In an interview with the Reuters news agency in June 2023, Imran accused the military and its intelligence agency of openly trying to destroy his political party. Under pressure, several PTI leaders deserted, forming a new party, Istehkam-e-Pakistan.

Imran Khan has been in jail since August 2023 and was barred from standing in the elections. He has been hit with multiple sentences ranging from three to 14 years in prison, the verdict in three cases coming less than ten days before the elections.

In contrast, the army threw its weight behind Nawaz Sharif, who returned to Pakistan after a four-year self-imposed exile from London. The courts quickly overturned past convictions against him, paving the way for his return to active politics. In an election rally at Nankana Sahib, Sharif's daughter, Maryam Nawaz, acknowledged that Pakistan's powerful military establishment brought her father back from the UK.

After a protracted legal battle, the Supreme Court of Pakistan upheld an Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) ruling, stripping the PTI of its cricket bat symbol. The verdict came less than a month before the elections. Consequently, all PTI candidates fought the elections as independents, with individual electoral symbols. The party also lost the right to nominate candidates for reserved seats across the central and provincial legislatures.

Unpacking the Poll Verdict

It is apparent that Imran Khan remains Pakistan's most popular leader. The independents backed by the PTI do not have the majority to form the government and are unlikely to enter into a coalition with either the PML-N or the PPP. They are more likely to play a disruptive role, continuing with their tirade that the elections were stolen from them. PTI supporters have already commenced protests across Pakistan on alleged poll rigging in the elections.

Courts in Pakistan are facing a flood of applications, mainly from PTI candidates challenging the election results. The petitioners claim that they were victorious against their opponents as per Form 45, but their victories were allegedly turned into defeats in Form 47, which is a summary of all the Form 45 from each polling station. These court cases could add to the political uncertainty in the country.

Although Nawaz Sharif has claimed victory being the single largest party, the election results have been a massive setback for PML-N. Even in their stronghold of Punjab, the party could secure only 137 Assembly seats out of 296.

The PML-N and the PPP are in talks to form a coalition government on the lines of the PDM, but there are considerable challenges. In a surprise move, PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif nominated his brother, Shehbaz Sharif, as the next Prime Minister. While the PPP has backed this choice, it has not committed to joining the government and would provide support from the outside. The legitimacy of a minority government so formed will always be in doubt, and it will struggle to make politically sensitive decisions, particularly in finding ways to deal with the economic situation.

In two days of trading after the elections, the Pakistan Stock Exchange has plunged by 3000 points due to political uncertainty. There are fears that a minority government facing a strong opposition will be unable to take tough decisions to extricate the country from the economic crisis. The record of the last PDM government also does not inspire much confidence in dealing with the economy.

The political challenges for the new government are also daunting. The country is deeply polarised, and this is reflected in the results of the provincial assemblies. The PPP will be in power in Sind, the PTI in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and the PML-N in Punjab. This will further complicate the task of the federal government, which will also be facing a disruptive opposition in the National Assembly.

As the election results trickled in, Pakistan Army Chief General Asim Munir issued a statement calling for "a unified government of all democratic forces imbued with national purpose." He asked political leaders to rise above self-interests and synergise efforts in governing and serving the people.

These words could be seen as an attempt to cover up the Pakistan Army's dismal failure to politically engineer Nawaz's victory. Imran Khan had openly come out against Pakistan's powerful military, and he has been supported by

the people who have delivered a stinging response in rejecting the military's proxies.

It is too early to say whether this marks a significant shift in the army's domination of the political landscape. The generals will undoubtedly resist any change in the power equation, but the people of Pakistan must reinforce the message that the military's interference is creating a broken political system that does no good for the country. In some way, this message has been conveyed in the current elections.

How will the formation of a new government in Islamabad impact relations with India? In his victory declaration, Nawaz Sharif said, "We would improve ties with the world and with our neighbours and try to solve all issues with them (neighbours)." Nawaz has generally been seen as being relatively favourable towards India, but the same cannot be said about his coalition partner, Bilawal Bhutto, who has displayed a more hardline anti-India stance. The role of the Pakistan Army, which defines the trajectory of India-Pakistan relations, will also be crucial in whether they are willing to address the core issue of terrorism directed against India.

There would be little incentive for the Indian side to engage immediately with a weak Pakistani government beset with internal problems. Things could change after the 2024 Indian general elections and if there is a level of political stability in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The recent elections in Pakistan have demonstrated a turbulent and polarised political climate, which has culminated in a fragmented outcome. The fractured election results, leading to no clear majority, have set the stage for a fragile coalition government that may struggle to govern effectively.

The electorate's rebuke of the military's perceived political interventions serves as a reminder that the democratic process must be respected and protected from undue influence. The army's involvement in politics remains a contentious issue, and whether there will be a change civil-military relations will be closely watched.

The economic ramifications of the elections are already visible, with the stock market reacting negatively to the uncertainty. The incoming government faces an unenviable task of addressing the financial crisis while contending with a disruptive opposition. This political and economic instability could have far-

reaching implications, not only internally but also in shaping Pakistan's foreign relations, particularly with India.



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