



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

Pakistan's General Election 2024

Author

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Cover Photographs:

PPP president Asif Ali Zardari in a meeting with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Lahore on July 15, 2023. Source: Press Information Department, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan.

Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir hands over the inaugural scroll to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif during the inaugural ceremony of the Green Pakistan Initiative in Islamabad on July 10, 2023. Source: Press Information Department, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan.

PMLN Leader Nawaz Sharif, brother Shehbaz Sharif and daughter Maryam Nawaz during a rally in Lahore on October 21, 2023. Source: X/@pmln_org

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Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|---|
| BAP | Baluchistan Awami Party |
| COAS | Chief of Army Staff |
| CPEC | China-Pakistan Economic Corridor |
| DG | Director General |
| ECP | Election Commission of Pakistan |
| IPP | Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party |
| ISI | Inter-Service Intelligence |
| JI | Jamaat-e-Islami (Pakistan) |
| JUI-F | Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal-ur-Rehman |
| MQM-P | Muttahida Qaumi Movement – Pakistan |
| PDM | Pakistan Democratic Movement |
| PkMAP | Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party |
| PML-N | Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz |
| PPP | Pakistan Peoples Party |
| PTI | Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf |
| PTI-P | Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarians |
| TLP | Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan |

Pakistan's General Election 2024

by

Shreyas Deshmukh

Introduction

After a decade of political upheaval, the Election Commission of Pakistan has set February 8, 2024 as the date for the upcoming general elections. The Shehbaz Sharif-led government was dissolved ahead of schedule on August 9, and a caretaker government, led by Senator Anwarul Haq Kakar from the Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP), known for his pro-establishment views, has stepped in. The provincial Assemblies of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were dissolved in January, and Sindh and Baluchistan followed suit in August. If the national assembly is dissolved prematurely, the constitution obligates the Election Commission to organise elections within 90 days. However, the delimitation process of constituencies, security issues and unavailability of funds was used as a pretext for delaying the elections.

The last decade in Pakistan has witnessed huge political instability, causing immense systemic pressures across the nation. The institutions responsible for managing the situation have had no time for timely decisions due to the uncontrollable pace of events. Socio-economic disparities in Pakistan have grown. Now, the deep state establishment aims to fill the gap through the caretaker government and push the new government to adhere to their policy directions.

While the political equations and policy priorities in Pakistan may appear similar to those of the last few decades, the context has evolved. Geopolitical excuses can no longer be used to side track attention from internal political and economic matters. As the former Foreign Minister of China Qin Gang said in May 2023, his country "sincerely hopes that all political forces in Pakistan will build up consensus, maintain stability, respond more effectively to domestic and external challenges, and pool efforts to grow economy and improve people's livelihood."¹ Therefore, it is pertinent to understand the present situation before contextualising pre- and post-election scenarios, which will likely start a new chapter of power politics between the civilian and military leadership.

Context

None of the events in the last decade were unusual for Pakistan's political history. The Faizabad sit-in by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in November 2017 is regarded as the reference point for the beginning of ongoing political turmoil in Pakistan. It lasted for more than a month, virtually bringing down the PML-N-led government. Former Director General Inter-Service Intelligence (DG ISI) Faiz Hamid was blamed as an architect of the event, while acting under the orders of the then Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Bajwa. Such competition between institutions and individuals to establish superiority has gradually eroded Pakistan's polity.

The Military Establishment

In the early years after the 2014 elections, the PML-N-led government and then COAS Raheel Sharif were occupied with managing the security crisis caused by the devastating terrorist attack on a Peshawar School, where 150 children lost their lives. By late 2016, cracks in civil-military relations emerged due to policy issues involving India, Afghanistan, troop deployment in Yemen, the merger of FATA with KP, and economic restructuring. Additionally, there was a change in military leadership in November 2016. Gen. Raheel Sharif, the COAS, decided to retire at the height of his popularity, and against the expectations of extending his term. Following retirement, he assumed the prestigious position of Commander-in-Chief of the Saudi-led military alliance in Yemen. But, by then, the brewing discontent between the government and military leadership was leaked through a newspaper article, famously known as "Dawn Leaks".²

While transitioning military leadership to Gen. Bajwa, Gen. Sharif also left an institutional-ideological inheritance to exert influence over the civilian leadership. Against a backdrop of discontent in civil-military relations, Gen. Bajwa planned to use political engineering to influence the 2018 General Elections. Putting Imran Khan in the Prime Minister's chair was a "Long-Term Project" for the establishment, particularly Gen. Bajwa.³ By leveraging Imran Khan, the military leadership under Gen. Bajwa aimed to quickly address socio-economic and political fault lines in pursuit of his ambitious agendas.⁴

Not until it was too late did the military realise their mistake. Within a year of the elections, PTI leaders rode the wave of populism and began to override military dictates. In response, COAS Bajwa adjusted his command to maintain oversight on the civilian leadership. Lt. Gen. Faize Hamid was appointed as DG ISI, replacing Lt. Gen. Asif Munir (now COAS), who held the position for just

eight months. He was reassigned to Corps Commander Gujranwala, which is considered a less important posting. Ayesha Siddiq, Scholar on the Pakistan military affairs, in her June 2019 article titled "New ISI Chief Faiz Hameed a manipulator picked by Army Chief Bajwa to be his master's voice", deemed the new DG ISI as "an average officer" with "above average personal ambitions".⁵

In September 2020, opposition leaders were cautioned by Gen. Bajwa and Lt. Gen. Hameed to refrain from involving the army in political matters, to reduce Army's excessive exposure. However and unrelenting, Nawaz Sharif, in a multi-party conference organised by the PPP, stated that his struggle was not directed at Imran Khan but at those who enabled his rise to power.⁶ Conversely, the power sharing between the Army and PTI caused a rise in contestation between institutions on key policy issues including foreign policy, leading to decision paralysis.

The impact on the economy and foreign relations of Pakistan has been severe. Imran Khan was overlooked by traditional allies like the UAE and Saudi Arabia. China had concerns about the progress of CPEC since Lt. Gen. Asim Saleem Bajwa (Retd) became Chairman of the CPEC authority in November 2019, seen as corrupt and self-serving.

COAS Bajwa, whose retirement was due in October 2019, realised the failure of his efforts and "Long-Term Project", as socio-economic and political divisions became more pronounced. In order to correct his mistakes, he had two choices: extend his tenure as COAS or declare Martial Law. Gen. Bajwa forced his extension to avoid declaring Martial Law and taking responsibility, considering the country's already precarious economic situation. Imran Khan had no choice but to extend the tenure to save his PTI government. This extension had a ripple effect, causing discontent within Army ranks, and calls for a change in military leadership started rising. Initially this resulted in ouster of Lt. Gen. Faize Hameed from the post of DG ISI, who was moved as a Peshawar Corps commander and later to Bahawalpur before announcing his early retirement. After his own retirement in November 2022, Gen. Bajwa remained out of sight from internal politics and spent most of the time out of the country. As accusations over Army's political involvements grew, in an unprecedented move, the new DG ISI, Lt. Gen. Nadeem Ahmed Anjum, the successor of Lt. Gen. Hameed, had to conduct a press conference to defend the Army and to control the deteriorating situation.⁷

Gen. Munir, the new COAS, who was previously removed as DG ISI by Gen. Bajwa, attempted to resolve the situation with support from the PDM-led government coalition. He was required to discard and undo the "Long-Term

Project" as part of the course correction. After the assassination attempt on Imran Khan, the situation further deteriorated. Imran Khan directly accused Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah and DG Counter Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Naseer, for the attempt.⁸ The attacks on 20 military installations on May 9, 2023, carried out by Imran Khan supporters after his arrest, provided an opportunity to the establishment to bring the situation under control. These attacks were denounced as a "Dark Chapter" and a "false revolution" by the Army. The Army too had to pay the price of its actions of political interference at the institutional level. Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Salman Fayyaz Ghani was among the three senior officers sacked by the Army, while fifteen others, including three Major Generals and seven Brigadiers, faced disciplinary actions.⁹ Also, GHQ in Rawalpindi had to confront the Judiciary over the filing of cases in a military court against 102 civilians for the attacks.

The calculated approach by COAS Gen. Munir offered an opportunity to the Army to regain control over the situation. The DG ISPR rejected the possibility of martial law to prevent disclosing military weaknesses and being held accountable for the critical economic and security conditions. In contrast, the caretaker government is regarded as a surrogate for the military, established as it was through a consensus with political parties.

In July 2023, the National Assembly and Senate jointly approved an amendment to the "Election Act 2017", expanding the authority of the caretaker government. This created room to advance politically difficult agendas, such as deporting Afghan refugees and implementing economic reforms. The same amendment restricted the disqualification of any politician to a period of only five years, clearing the path for Nawaz Sharif to contest the coming elections as his disqualification period ended in July 2023.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the ECP's ruling in the Toshakhana case has barred Imran Khan from contesting the 2024 elections.

The PTI ended up split, with the military establishment forcing most of its leadership to leave the party. Smaller parties avoided confrontation with the establishment, considering Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi's incarceration. Chaudhry's own relatives, who enjoy political influence, did not step in to save him. Once again, PMLN is seen as the favourite of the military establishment due to the Sharif brothers' skills in managing economic and foreign policy. Over the past two decades, PPP chose to play it safe and refrained from antagonising the establishment, except for a statement made by Asif Ali Zardari in June 2015. In his criticism over the Army's interference in politics, Zardari said, "If you do not stop, I will come out with a list of accused generals since Pakistan's creation."¹¹ It cost him 18 months in self-exile, only to be back in

December 2016, after negotiating with COAS Gen. Bajwa. The senior judiciary is the only opposition the military establishment is now facing. PML-N labelled the judiciary a "reminiscence of the previous political regime", as the senior judges of the Supreme Court are still sympathetic to Imran Khan. Meanwhile, the judiciary is determined to expose the establishment by reopening cases from the Faizabad sit-in. The Coalition Government led by Shahbaz Sharif attempted to pass a bill limiting the chief justice's powers, including suo moto cognisance, but the Supreme Court suspended the implementation.¹² The bill may make a comeback post the general election.

Gen. Bajwa's overstep was unanimously acknowledged as a mistake by the military, political parties, and the judiciary of Pakistan, a first in the country's history. The military establishment attempted to avoid responsibility and manipulate public opinion, but in doing so, they relinquished a significant amount of their political capital and influence to traditional political parties such as PMLN, PPP, MQM-P, JUI-F, and JI.

The Political Parties

The political influence of only a few families in Pakistan is due to their aptitude for withstanding and managing unexpected political fluctuations. Influencing political decisions through institutional support from the military, judiciary, or bureaucracy is an alternative to fulfilling political ambitions for people outside of these families. Therefore, political instability in Pakistan is a product of overlapping ambitions and the continuous shifting of power dynamics.

Pakistan-Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

The Pakistan-Tehreek-e-Insaf led by Imran Khan is comparatively a new party in the political arena, with less political acumen required to sustain itself in such a chaotic space. Imran Khan, who is already 71 years old, had a short window to realise his political aspirations. Instead of carving out political space through cooperation, he spent most of his time on self-centred politics and waited for a favourable opportunity, which came in 2018. Zahid Hussain, a Pakistani political commentator, shared his experience with a PTI politician who asserted that they "are the only choice for the establishment".¹³ This showed how much the PTI relied on the establishment and judiciary by isolating itself from other political forces, including the bureaucracy. Also, people admired Imran Khan's revolutionary attitude in simultaneously battling the military establishment, bureaucracy, and opposition. Despite losing power and facing challenges, PTI secured 15 out of 20 seats in Punjab by-elections in July 2022.¹⁴ The seats became vacant due to the disqualification of PTI

members supporting Hamza Sharif's bid for Punjab Chief Minister. PML-N won only four seats. Further, Imran Khan's popularity increased following the assassination attempt against him. The PTI's dismemberment has marked the end of that rising political fortune on May 9. The majority of senior leaders have departed from the Party; some have even abandoned their political careers, while two new regional parties have emerged from PTI.

Former Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pervez Khattak, has founded Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarians (PTI-P). The Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) has been formed by Jehangir Khan Tareen, with a focus on Punjab. Khattak and Tareen held Imran Khan responsible for sidelining his political allies and relying on military leaders (Gen. Bajwa and Lt. Gen. Faize Hameed) to make all the decisions. Many former PTI members joined one of these parties, while some in Sindh and South Punjab joined the PPP. PML-N is wary because several PTI members in Punjab were once part of their own party.

PTI is not banned from contesting the elections, but there is no remaining leadership to compete in 2024. Accused in the "Cipher Case", Imran Khan and Shah Mehmud Qureshi faced the possibility of a death sentence or 14 years behind bars for misusing confidential state documents for political purposes. Moreover, there are over 200 cases registered against Imran Khan, ranging from illegal marriage to sedition. Imran Khan's final support base will be lost as changes occur in the judiciary. Although Imran Khan's political career is not over, he will probably be absent from the upcoming elections and from politics for the next five years. His behaviour and policies have also caused him to be isolated internationally. The military establishment in Pakistan defines a limit to democracy that people cannot surpass. Therefore, populism might not be of much assistance to Imran Khan in his efforts to rebuild his image following the May 9 attacks on military installations.

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)

Following its defeat in the 2014 elections against the PML-N, the PPP built strong ties with the military establishment and acted as a cooperative opposition in the National Assembly. Later, it formed an alliance with the PML-N and other smaller parties to create PDM, a coalition against the PTI. But when Nawaz Sharif clearly expressed his intentions in the Multi-Party Conference that his fight was not against Imran Khan but with the people who brought him into power, the PPP distanced itself from PML-N. However, it remained in the coalition government formed by PDM after ousting Imran Khan in a no-confidence motion in April 2022. During this period, PPP retained its grip on Sindh and made inroads into Punjab.

The PPP has come to the realisation that the PML-N, with its strong connection to the military establishment through Shahbaz Sharif, could potentially form the next government. Bilawal Bhutto has consistently highlighted the amicable bond between the PML-N and the establishment. Conversely, Nawaz Sharif and Zardari have stayed in touch regularly. The situation requires the PPP to continue protecting its space. Whenever an opportunity has presented itself, Zardari has employed political manoeuvring in a cautious manner. For example, in March 2021, Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani, PPP's candidate, became the opposition leader in the Senate with the support of JI, defeating PML-N candidate Azam Nazeer Tara.¹⁵ Meanwhile, ahead of the elections, both parties are making efforts to entice small regional parties.

The PPP is concerned about the lack of local leadership in other provinces, leading to the necessity of forming a coalition, potentially with PTI-K in KP, IPP in Punjab, and BNP in Baluchistan. The potential danger of aligning with PTI-K, IPP, or recruiting former PTI members lies in the fact that some are still under surveillance by the military establishment. Thus, the likelihood of an eventual PPP-PML-N coalition cannot be dismissed.

Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N)

Nawaz Sharif has perfected the skill of political survival in Pakistan. PML-N's struggle to remain in power from the 2014 elections to 2018 involved constant confrontations with the military establishment, the judiciary, and the PTI. Following the Panama Papers leaks, Nawaz Sharif was sentenced in July 2017 to seven years in jail and 10 years of public office disqualification. It forced him to spend four years in London in self-exile. A senior Pakistan journalist Sohail Warraich wrote in 2018 that "Nawaz is gaining time just to see changes in judiciary and military or some international upheaval".¹⁶

Immediately after his arrival from London in October 2023, Nawaz Sharif kicked off an election campaign, with a proper plan, just as he has been preparing for this election in the last four years. He formed an alliance with MQM-P in Karachi, and visited Baluchistan, where many "electables" from the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) defected to PML-N. From Pashtun Areas, PkMAP and JUI-F have already joined hands with PML-N. Nawaz Sharif appointed his close commandant Ishaq Dar chairman of the PML-N election cell and another 40 members to a new manifesto committee. The focus of the manifesto would be to change the narrative that PML-N is the new favourite of the establishment, and economic and judicial reforms.

While speaking on Nawaz's arrival in Pakistan, Shabaz Sharif said that his brother is not coming "to settle scores".¹⁷ With his decades of experience, Nawaz Sharif may know that his return, and winning the elections, in itself is revenge and will secure his legacy and the political future of his family. There is also a possibility that he might bring all political actors together to establish civilian supremacy in the legislature, by taking advantage of an opportunity when the military establishment and judiciary are on the back foot and fighting with each other. This is, however, a risky proposition that could put the political future of Nawaz on the line.

Probable Scenarios

The administrative ability of Pakistan's caretaker government is limited. Its primary objective is to establish the policy direction by making politically challenging decisions and create a pathway for the elected government to continue following it. The political actors and the judiciary will confront the military establishment if elections are postponed again. In such a scenario, the military may opt for Martial Law, granting the caretaker government the authority to manage daily affairs under the COAS's guidance. Given Pakistan's reliance on foreign funds and isolation in international politics, such a scenario is highly unlikely. Martial Law will result in further isolation, loss of credibility, and an inevitable economic collapse.

Holding free and fair elections in February 2024 may bring the needed stability to Pakistan. Demands for a level playing field have already been raised by the parties, indicating that some may reject the election mandate if they lose. This may result in a continuation of political instability.

PTI-K and IPP might still become crucial kingmakers, despite the PTI being out of electoral politics as a major force. The military establishment may not want another divisive episode of container politics, which has polarised society.

PML-N is being seen as a strong contender, and the military establishment may be considering its future strategy on how to manage Nawaz. Opting for Shabaz Sharif would ensure smooth inter-institutional communication. The traditional allies of Pakistan like the US, UK, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and China would likely prefer PML-N at the helm of affairs. However, if the military establishment feels threatened by PML-N, then the PPP remains the second option.

Elections do not mean Democracy

Pakistan, with a population of 240 million, did not host a single head of state visit in 2023. The last such visit was that of Emomali Rahmon, the President of Tajikistan, in December 2022. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, after assuming the role of foreign minister, travelled to 16 countries in just six months, including Lithuania, Hungary, and Mauritania. Hina Rabbani Khar, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, visited all European countries and attended the EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in Oslo, despite the country's non-recognition of the Indo-Pacific construct.¹⁸ In May 2020, the National Assembly of Pakistan conducted marathon sessions to adhere to the constitutional mandate of 130 days in the parliamentary year.¹⁹ Over the past eight general elections held since 1988, the average voter turnout has been a mere 44 percent.²⁰ This suggests that elections in Pakistan are implemented solely to fulfill a constitutional requirement and benefit the political elites. Personal ambitions have overshadowed national interest in Pakistani elections. Political instability in the country will continue to persist for generations unless there is a structural change in this long-standing trend.

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