



2024 Elections in Pakistan: Play of Alliances and Dictated Democracy



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Amidst persisting uncertainty and rumours of potential delay of the elections, the Pakistan Election Commission has agreed to hold elections on February 8, 2024. The political crisis in Pakistan is unfolding complex dynamics of a dysfunctional state which accommodates interesting contradictions. While Pakistan has consistently proclaimed itself as a democratic state, the will of the people rarely reflects in regime choices and domestic policies impacting the common man. History suggests continual political crises in Pakistan have invariably strengthened the military and its ability to control critical decision-making, besides its pervasive expansion in the economic domain resulting in substantive pecuniary dividends for the military lobby.

The political turmoil started in Pakistan last year in 2022 with apparent strains between Imran Khan and the military. It was followed by Imran Khan's dramatic exit from the PM office in a no-confidence vote, a series of jalsas/rallies by Khan protruding his immense popularity (despite his incompetence in governance and inability to control economic decline), deep polarisation of the society and state institutions (including the military), and finally, the May 9th violence which was termed as a 'black day' by the army. This paved way for the military to take complete control of the crisis with subsequent repressive steps which resulted in further crippling of democratic process in Pakistan.

Imran Khan, who remains the most popular leader, is behind bars and is facing close to 180 legal cases. Khan and former Foreign Affairs Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi are being held for violating the Official Secrets Act under the Cipher case. Khan and his aide Qureshi have been

charged with inappropriately handling the cipher (diplomatic cable) sent by the Pakistani Ambassador to the United States, Asad Majeed Khan, regarding a meeting with the State Department officials early last year. Both the PTI leaders are accused of making the secret cable public. It appears that the cipher case has strong potential to completely isolate Imran Khan & company from the 2024 elections. Imran Khan's party, Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf (PTI) stands disintegrated after the military-led crackdown that followed the May 9th violence. A significant number of the party loyalists have exited the party and joined the newly formed party, Istehkam-i-Pakistan Party (IPP), led by former PTI leader and sugar baron, Jahangir Khan Tareen. Imran will be kept out of the political scene and his fragmented party holds negligible ability to perform in the upcoming elections. In an attempt to campaign amidst the ban and restrictions, Imran Khan recently used artificial intelligence (AI) in conducting a virtual rally. The use of AI has been PTI's strength which allowed it to expand its young fan base.

Nawaz Sharif is back from London with a tacit nod from the military establishment. He is being viewed as the best choice for the establishment at this point in time and is expected to revive the popularity of his party Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N). It appears that the military establishment believes that Nawaz has the charisma to fetch popular support in Punjab province. There is indeed an underlying expectation that Nawaz Sharif will help in stabilising the economy. Nawaz's closeness and the convivial relationship with the Gulf states could potentially fetch much-desired financial investment and economic assistance for Pakistan's ailing economy which is likely to remain dependent on external assistance for a good time.

In this interestingly complex political space, new alliances are being stitched together and the PML-N is working hard to expand its support base. In Punjab, Nawaz's most significant political rival Imran Khan's PTI stands stranded and appears less threatening. The Jamait Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) has agreed with Nawaz's party for seat adjustment and close collaboration in Punjab. Apart from this, the two parties have also reportedly agreed on seat adjustments in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

In an interesting but not unforeseen move, an alliance has been formed between PML-N and the Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) in Sindh, and more specifically, in the provincial capital of Karachi. PML-N appears confident of giving a strong opposition to PPP in Sindh with the cooperation from MQM-P and Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA).

In Balochistan, where electables play a critical role in elections, Nawaz Sharif visited Quetta on the invitation of *Sardars of Balochistan*. PML-N is expecting the support of over 20 electables in Balochistan. While the political stage is being set for PNL-N's victory in the upcoming elections with the establishment's approbations, PPP appears frustrated and has been complaining that it is not getting a level playing field.

The Pakistan military's powers have been expanded after May 9th and the much debated and controversial amendments- The Army Amendment Act and the Official Secrets Act, grant unquestionable powers to the military. The ruling of the Supreme Court, allowing the trial of civilians by military courts, will further tighten the state's control on the political landscape and its ability to coerce anti-state voices or behaviour.

While the political environment in Pakistan paves the way for another dent in the democratic process, the military is working towards fetching foreign investments and reviving critical strategic relationships. The newly formed Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), has given the military an additional institutionalised role (along with the civilian leadership) in the decision-making related to facilitating fast-track foreign investment without hurdles of bureaucratic delays.

General Asim Munir's recent visit to the United States in December has generated debate on the dynamics of the US-Pakistan relations. Pakistan's relations with Washington have been critical in defining the contours of its foreign policy. The current phase of bilateral relations is focused more on non-traditional security threats. However, Pakistan has been keen to revive the security dynamics in the relationship which serves the strategic objectives of the generals in Pakistan.

With the military's expanded powers and the state using draconian measures to curb anti-state/establishment voices, the credibility of the 2024 elections remains questionable and it's once again a full circle for Pakistan where the selected leader is likely to be elected in a military-dictated electoral exercise.

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