



## Pakistan Elections 2024: What Does It Mean for Pakistan?



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After days of speculation, the controversial Pakistan general elections held on February 8 led to an agreement between the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) to form a coalition government. PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif will assume the role of Prime Minister for the second time, and PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari has been nominated for the position of President. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) has agreed to extend support to the alliance. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) candidates who contested as independents and joined hands with the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) failed to get a majority. The elections have been marred by accusations of rigging and violence in favour of the party 'selected' by the military establishment, the PML. The most popular leader, Imran Khan, is behind bars fighting more than 150 legal cases. PTI candidates contested as independents as the party was denied its election symbol and did manage a surprising number despite claims of rigging and the establishment's coercive tactics during the elections. The elections saw a voter turnout of about 48%. It is important to note that the elections were held against the backdrop of prolonged political uncertainty, deep economic challenges, an alarming security situation with continued attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and the reverberation of the May 9 violence. The events of May 9 were completely unprecedented in a military-run state and manifested deep polarisation within society and state institutions and growing anti-military sentiments within the masses. Pakistan's electoral system has remained, by and large, controversial, marked by political engineering and the military's interference, and elections in 2024 are no exception.

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However, this phase of elections is distinct as the establishment encountered the challenge of the unfathomable popularity of Imran Khan, which challenged its capacity to manipulate political dynamics. The PTI-backed candidates performed well despite rigging and misreporting, as confessed by Rawalpindi Commissioner Liaquat Ali Chattha, who took responsibility for the wrongdoing and resigned from his post. Chattha also claimed the involvement of the Chief Election Commissioner and the Chief Justice in the rigging and mishandling of the elections to preclude the victory of the PTI candidates. In a volte-face, a few days after his announcement, Chattha denied his claims. Even after months of rigorous efforts by the establishment to weaken PTI and undermine Imran Khan's position, the people's mandate, clearly, was in favour of Khan. In the 2018 elections, it was the military that supported Imran Khan against the PML-N and projected him as a clean leader needed for the upliftment of Pakistan.

Some developments in the elections are positive and do indicate a welcome change in society. Firstly, a large sector of the voter base—approximately 44%—was below the age of 35 and played a major role in defining the mandate. Also, there was a larger participation of women in this election, and over 20 women candidates won across the national and provincial constituencies. Secondly, the 2024 elections demonstrate deep anti-military sentiments among the masses, who directly or indirectly hold the military responsible for the country's deepening economic woes and persistent political instability. Clearly, every successive election in Pakistan leads to a stronger political hold of the establishment and further weakening of the democratic forces. The suppressive tactics of the establishment did not deter the voters in the elections from supporting the PTI candidates who are not part of dynasty politics and not favourites of the military. Thirdly, and very importantly, the radical religious parties did not perform well in the elections and failed badly. The reasons could be twofold—the 2024 elections were mainly driven by three political personalities: Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, and Bilawal Bhutto, and the leaders of the religious parties had little space here. Secondly, the elections had a significant young voter base who did not seem to be attracted by the radical parties.

Pakistan will start a new journey under the political leadership of Shehbaz Sharif, who has had a good and stable record with the military, and he is likely to not assert himself against the establishment, unlike Nawaz Sharif, who shares a rancorous past with the generals. Although PML-N had complete support from the establishment and Nawaz's return was perceived as a game changer

for the party, the party could not perform very well in Punjab and barely managed a lead. The PPP maintained its hold in Sindh and performed well as anticipated. The PTI has rejected the idea of joining or extending support to either of the leading parties, and has been challenging the election results. The PTI has joined the right-wing SIC, which is an alliance of Islamic political and religious parties. It remains to be seen how this alliance will impact PTI's image within its support base. Although the elections were seen as a blow to the military's stature and its ability to manage people's perceptions, the fact remains that the outcome of the elections is very much in sync with the military's choice. Pakistan is likely to have a weak coalition that lacks credibility. This works in favour of the establishment, as the coalition will have a restricted ability to assert itself and will be highly dependent on the military for its survival. Imran Khan & party will continue to challenge the functioning of the government. The military's role in the economic domain has been further strengthened and institutionalised with the creation of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). Foreign investment will, by and large, stay under the control of the military. Although Pakistan's economic crisis has been managed for some time, it's far from stability. The foreign reserves stand at approximately US \$8 billion, which is barely sufficient to cover eight weeks of imports. Inflation stands at around 30 per cent, and the value of the Pakistani rupee against the US dollar dropped to a record low last year. The Shehbaz Sharif government will need to take tough decisions for structural changes and deal with economic strains. A new plan with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) needs to be negotiated. Imran Khan has reportedly written to the IMF, requesting that the financial organisation conduct an audit of the election results before sanctioning a new loan. Conventional wisdom suggests that a weak coalition will face the challenges of getting consensus on these decisions. Even though the military in Pakistan has experienced a strong anti-establishment mandate in the elections, it has been successful in manoeuvring the election outcome. The establishment gathered additional powers constitutionally and institutionally after May 9, 2023, and will continue to assert itself. How long the new government manages to stay in the good books of the generals remains to be seen.

Speculations are rife as to how the India-Pakistan strained relations will shape up under the new regime. Political statements from Pakistan expressing interest in talking to India are not unlikely in the months to come. Previous statements issued by the caretaker government under Shehbaz Sharif and again by Nawaz Sharif during the election campaign did express willingness for regional peace and talking to India, based on the condition (driven by wishful thinking) that India should

reverse its decision to abrogate Article 370. Will the new government deviate from Pakistan's existing political position in talks with India? The second critical question is whether the Pakistan military sees stabilising relations with India serving its strategic interests?

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

