

Pakistan's General Elections 2018

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Executive Summary



The year 2018 marks a decisive election year for Pakistan. Citizens will be heading to the polls to vote for the political party that will determine their country's fate till 2023.

The past five years represented a challenging environment before the election period.

Disqualification of the Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, elected in 2013 by the Supreme Court in April from politics and his 10 year imprisonment announced by the accountability court just three weeks before the elections, has raised doubts and questions regarding efficient governance amongst experts. Will corrupted governance be depleted from the political landscape or, is the

deep state of the army manifested in country's institutions.

Such uncertainties and military interventions in civilian government have resulted in no Prime Minister being able to serve his full term in office. Different drivers and situations have put forth a new challenge in the upcoming election cycle: the ruling party being confronted by accusations of corruption; the advent of technology and social media; the actions of the election commission; the role of the judiciary and the army in governance; and the rise of sectarian religious groups. All this has led to a convergence of a political situation bounded with unpredictability.

Abbreviations

- ECP:** Election Commission of Pakistan
- PML-N:** Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz
- PPP:** Pakistan People's Party
- PTI:** Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf
- MMA:** Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal
- TLP:** Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan's election year of 2018 marks to be an important phase for its democratic governance, mainly due to it being the second democratic transition for the country. Interventions in civil authority, due to assassinations and disqualifications of its leaders; or intrusions due to military coups in the past, has always undermined an establishment of stable democratic institutions. Thus, the second turn of democratic transition, reflects a new democratic space being established.

Presently different drivers and situations have put forth a new challenge in the upcoming election cycle: the ruling party being confronted under a baggage of corruption; the advent of technology and social media; the actions of the election commission; the role of the judiciary and the army in governance; and the rise of religious sectarian groups. All this has led to a convergence of a political situation bounded with unpredictability.



(AFP PHOTO / RIZWAN TABASSUM)

The Electoral Scenario

The most recent census was conducted in 2017 after a decade and a half. This has put forth new numbers regarding population composition of Pakistan. Such data becomes necessary for the country to plan its governance and hence utilise its resources efficiently (Younas, 2018). The absence of such information in the past has led to most of the policy decision-making practice mere guess-work.

Number of registered voters according to the Election commission of Pakistan (millions)	
Male	59.22
Female	46.73
Total	105.96

Source: DAWN

The population in current context totals roughly to 200 million, among which 105.96 million are registered voters, this is a 23% increase since the last election cycle of 2013: when the number of registered voters was 86.19 million. Upcoming election cycle's prediction is densely influenced by the delimitation process that has been implemented following the census. The voter population differs with different provinces in Pakistan.

The Election Process

The election process in Pakistan follows the Westminster first-past-the-post system (Wilkinson, 2018). The Parliament consists of the two houses, the National Assembly and the Senate -- lower and the upper houses respectively.

The National Assembly (lower house) comprises of 342 seats: 272 are directly elected; 60 are reserved for women and 10 for minority groups.

On the Election Day polling will take place in 272 constituencies across the country between 8:00 am till 6:00 PM.

	Punjab	Sindh	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Balochistan	FATA	Federal Capital	Total
General	148	61	35	14	12	2	272
Women	35	14	8	3	0	0	60
Non-Muslims	--	--	--	--	--	--	10
Total	183	75	43	17	12	2	342

Registered voters according to province (millions)	
Punjab	60.67
Sindh	22.39
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	15.32
Balochistan	4.30
Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata)	2.51
Total	105.96

Source: DAWN

Amongst the registered voters there are 42.4 million young voters, comprising 44% of registered voters between the ages of 18 and 35.

A total of 172 out of 342 seats are required for a governing majority in the National Assembly for the formation of new government.

The race to win the majority mainly involves three main contenders in Pakistan's political scenario of 2018 elections: the leading Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) with its centre-right government; the socialist Pakistan People's Party, under the chairmanship of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari; and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, founded and chaired by Imran Khan.

History and Background of Main Political Contenders

Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)



(REUTERS / FAISAL MAHMOOD)

Maryam Nawaz and Nawaz Sharif

Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) in the previous election cycle PML-N was the leading political party by sweeping a win with 176 seats in the National Assembly. Its ideological inclination is towards the centre-right. The political party traces its foundations to the Muslim League - the political party of the country's founder (Paracha, 2017).

The elected Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, was appointed to take over the post for the third time and was not new to the political setting. A former industrialist with a conservative and political mindset, he entered politics during the elections in 1990. During his second-term in 1999, military general Pervez Musharraf ousted him. He then went on exile to Saudi Arabia and made a comeback during the 2008 elections.

In July 2017, Nawaz Sharif resigned from his position when the Supreme Court ruled that he should be disqualified over corruption allegations (Rasmussen, 2017). The ruling follows accusations with regards to Panama Papers linking Sharif's close family members to offshore companies. The trial stripped Sharif off his position to even rule his own party before the Senate elections in March, resulting in permanent disqualification from politics in April (Bhatti, 2018). Sharif now has been sentenced to spend 10 years in jail after the verdict was announced by the accountability court on owning assets beyond income. His daughter, Maryam Nawaz, who has been active alongside Nawaz Sharif in politics is also sentenced to spend 7 years in jail for same reasons.

Pakistan People's Party



(REUTERS / FAISAL MAHMOOD)

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari

Pakistan people's party was founded in 1967 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; under whom the party championed the political philosophy of socialistic reform.

Bhutto was hanged in 1979 by a military dictator and his daughter, Benazir Bhutto, the successor of the party after him, was assassinated in 2007. These tragic events for the party, led Benazir's widower, Asif Ali Zardari to lead the party during the 2008 elections.

In the previous election cycle of 2013, PPP gained the third position at the national level by 15.1 percent votes. This is mainly due to the corruption baggage that the party had assimilated under Asif Ali Zardari, which deviated it from

its ideological socialist stance and of reform that Zulfikar Bhutto had initiated for the party. The loss of popularity of the PPP in recent years has degenerated its influence in the parliament, leaving only the province of Sindh under its grip.

The party, until now, thrives on the positioning of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which is being further pushed by the current chair of the party, Bilawal Bhutto, Benazir's son. The party dissipates the dialogue of a democratic set up in Pakistan and promises to restore its "lost" identity.

Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaaf



Imran Khan

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf was founded in the year 1996 by former cricketer Imran Khan, and is based on a centrist approach. During its initiation phase, the party failed to gain enough popularity and achieved no progress.

It started acclaiming its popularity from 2011 onwards, and the election cycle of 2013 proved to be a turning point for the political party. It made Khan an ideal contender and provided hope, especially to young masses by invoking a mindset of a revolutionised Pakistan.

Through rallies and campaigns, Imran Khan propagated his rhetoric of this revolutionised Pakistan, of a different Pakistan - a country free of corruption; and holding on to

its respect by rejecting the aid from US government.

Though Khan did not come close to winning the elections, his party, Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf (PTI) received the second-largest share of votes, trailing behind the country's established Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which became the ruling party that year. Out of 345 parliamentary seats, Khan won 28, and formed a provincial government in the economically troubled Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region.

The Turmoil of the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif: His dismissal for life and 10 year imprisonment

A series of shock and tremors along with reforms that are bounded with suspicions and controversies, mark few phases of the uncertain political climate before the elections. The biggest setback so far has been the disqualification of the elected Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, by the Supreme Court for corruption charges, last year (Shahzad & Jorgic, 2017). The trial then followed Supreme Court ruling on April 13 barring Nawaz Sharif forever

from and just three weeks before the elections Sharif was sentenced to spend 10 years in prison by the accountability court. The ruling party claims that the ousting was an anti-democratic "conspiracy" and a "judicial coup" (Barker, 2018). Sharif's ouster from political landscape led him to appoint Shahbaz Sharif, the Chief Minister of Punjab, to be the party's president and prime ministerial candidate.



Other Drivers

The Army

Pakistan's history has been carved with military coups, making them a key player when it comes to perpetuating economic, and policy-making initiatives. Presently, it is argued that the army is behind the disqualification of the Prime Minister and weakening of Sharif from power-

corridors; along with the second strongest contender at the political turf, Imran Khan. If this holds true, then history may repeat itself, when the army may encourage political proxies to run in parallel with their own agendas (Shams, 2018).



(MUHAMMAD ASAD / ANADOLU AGENCY)

Role of the Judiciary

The judiciary in Pakistan has been a key player to Nawaz Sharif's dismissal from the position of Prime Ministry and his permanent disqualification from politics. The verdict by the Supreme Court on Sharif has created an air of acrimony between the two (Mahmood, 2018).

Controversies and resentment with the ruling party notwithstanding, the Chief Justice of Pakistan said that the judiciary would ensure a free and fair election process. There would be a transference of bureaucrats between different provinces, so that there are no issues of manipulation evoked.

The court has also affirmed that the political parties should use their own funds for campaigns and not rely on hard-earned money of taxpayers. Likewise, the Election Commission has decided to appoint District Returning Officers* (DROs) and Returning Officers* (ROs) for the 2018 general elections from Judicial Officers of lower courts (Judicial officers to be appointed as ROs for elections, 2018)

Mass Culture and Social Media

As volatile as Pakistani political setting may seem, one medium that has been successful in shaping public discourse has been the media - especially social media in the current political space. The social media dominance was an obvious factor of influence even during the past election cycle of 2013: also called as Twitter election (Ahmed & Skoric, 2015).

The society craves change and transformation, and the platform of social media has made it easier for political rivals to disseminate information and form public opinion. Moreover, politicians have started personally engaging with its voters, making tech savvy public feel like shapers of society.

One really successful party to use the advent of social media during 2013 election campaigns has been Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf. The party made sure to interact with its voters, provide real time campaign updates, get dwelled in discussions of social and political issues and call on mobilisation of voters to vote.

The other opposing contenders learned from this technique and have adapted their own charismatic personality through social media. The politicians have realised that the tools of social media stimulate citizen engagement, especially amongst the young 60% of the population.

Peoples Turnout Rate

High voter turnout in any election is a fortune pillar of democracy. Various sociological and political factors in the past has led to voter turnout rates to be less than 50%. Poor awareness about sphere of politics, high crime rates, less economic development, lack of law and order are a

couple of factors that create a bleak in voter turnout (Khan, 2018). As a result, which party will prove a winning place in the upcoming elections depends entirely on whether its people will go out to vote or not.

Election Reforms: Election Act of 2017 and the autonomy of the Election Commission

The post-election period of 2013 was dominated by controversies of rigging, and the deficiencies that persisted in election laws. These factors were argued to have undermined transparency of a working democracy. The emphasis on these shortcomings led to a joint action through a parliamentary process, and an introduction of Elections Act in 2017 (Pran & Mirbahar, 2018).

This act introduced a series of major electoral reforms, to ensure greater transparency and fairness of the election process. This stance would have seemed impossible

during past governance, since these election laws are the first major electoral reforms after the first direct elections of the 1970s (Mirbahar & Simm, 2018).

The passed laws are aimed to provide more autonomy to the electoral management body - the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) - to ensure fair, efficient and transparent elections. Likewise, the ECP has also issued Election Rules 2017, which are more in depth than rules presented last time and has tried to regulate the process of delimitation.

Delimitation Process and Equality of Vote

Recently, the key challenge for ECP with respect to its role in the election process has been with the process of delimitation of constituencies, ensuring equality of population. The ECP is required to delimit constituency after every official census.

The Election Act requires the variation in electoral constituencies to not be more than 10%. The ECP is

believed to have violated this requirement and there are variations in constituencies more than the proposed 10% threshold. Such variations result in inequality of vote amongst its citizens - a phenomenon that is constantly a part of election history of the country. Experts therefore argue that the delimitation law needs improvement to ensure equality of vote in the coming elections (Bari, 2018)

Politics of patronage: The culture of the electable

One of the harvested challenges to Pakistani democracy is the reproduction of the culture of the electable candidates. Parties that are at the political forefront adopt this strategy and emphasize on the politics of patronage, money, muscle and tribal affiliations at the constituency level to

win the elections. Such practices weaken the political institutions and deviates authenticity of the political party, making decision-making vulnerable by concentrating it amongst the few at the top.

The religious political parties

The alliance between the religious political parties has been revived prior to the elections. This multi-party electoral is called Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and consist of four religious parties. The alliance has come forward to gain vote bank, which may prove to be more prominent in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

There is also a rise in a different hardline extreme sectarian groups like Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The same

sectarian wing which was responsible for Faizabad sit-in protests, paralyzing the capital Islamabad for weeks in November 2017.

Influence of religious political parties creates an impact to win the electoral race during the elections. With their own appeal amongst people, they have tendency to win-over dynastic politicians in constituencies, thus dividing votes.



Potential outcomes for upcoming elections

Who will win the upcoming elections is still bounded with uncertainty. Voter choices and attitudes are very fluid, and their decision in the end is reflective of campaigns, political events, and how leaders in rural communities drive away votes with them irrespective of their party affiliation.

Nawaz Sharif's corruption trial led him to be disqualified from the political scenario and to face jail, but his party PML-N still stands confident of sweeping majority, especially from the province of Punjab, its stronghold. The PPP led by young Bilawal Bhutto holds a firm ground in the southern Sindh province; through which it can maneuver its way into the national stage. Likewise, the other player Imran Khan from PTI has paved his way gaining popularity through his anti-corruption stance. Election pundits argue that PTI may embark on high success rates this time.

What holds contradictory to this rising democratic element of Pakistan is the existing deep-state of army and its institutions. Previous government's always stood

strong by support from the army to be able to establish government.

The culture of the electable, especially within the tribal areas is a factor too during the elections. The major voting bloc comes from the rural areas, where the electable elites are power players and cast voting influence in their respective regions. Similarly, the religious groups in the country also hold capacity to mobilize votes away from political parties and form their own alliances like the MMA.

Civilians of the country assert for jobs, employment, accountability, and infrastructure. These prospects come with efficient governance. Kleptocracy, military interventions and weak coalitions have led to poor civilian governance in the past thereby complicating efforts to improve public life. Once the dust settles after the Election Day, the promises made by political players will surface and come into real-time action.



(REUTERS / AKHTAR SOOMRO)

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