

## **The Pakistan Elections 2018: An Overview and the Road Ahead**

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**T**he past 22 years have been quite a journey for the  
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Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI). In 2002, the PTI had one seat (that of Imran Khan himself) in the National Assembly (NA); it boycotted the 2008 elections; in 2013 it had around 30 seats. Now it has 116 general seats. In the process, its vote bank increased from 1,60,686 votes in the 2002 elections to 7.6 million in 2013 and 16.8 million in 2018 (approximately 31.87 per cent of the votes), an increase of over 100 per cent. With the joining of nine independents and allocation of 28 reserved seats for women and five for minorities, its tally has gone up to 158. However, after vacating six seats that were won by its candidates in more than one constituency its net tally, till by-elections are held, would be 152. It has thus, become the largest national party at the Centre.

Though the PTI does not have a majority in the 342 members NA, Imran Khan has cobbled together a Government in Islamabad with the support of 27 Members of National Assembly (MNAs) from seven parties. It has retained its government in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KPK), a historic first. It has replaced the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Punjab, the largest and the most dominant province in Pakistan. In Sindh, it is the second largest party after the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), while in Balochistan it is part of a coalition government. In effect, the PTI has become a truly national party, winning seats from all the four provinces.

This success story is one of Imran Khan's belief in himself, his single-minded focus, stamina and determination. Imran has had the added advantage of not only being an outsider

campaigning relentlessly to end endemic corruption in Pakistan, but also the Pakistani Army's favourite. He has a corruption-free image and has inspired hope for change in large swathes of the electorate. Perhaps the most significant element in Imran Khan's victory is that he has managed to storm the Sharif bastion of Punjab and has broken through the patronage or '*thana-kutcherry*' politics that they had established and refined for three decades. With a PTI Government in the province, it will take the Sharifs a long time to rebuild their politics. His success has also introduced a third party into the electoral calculations instead of the established two-party system of the PML-N and the PPP and their dynastic politics.

### **Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N)**

The PML-N has 82 seats after the addition of 16 reserved seats for women and two for minorities. It had bagged 3.2 million votes in the 2002 elections for the NA, 6.8 million in 2008, 14.8 million in 2013 and was reduced to 12.89 million in 2018 (approximately 24.40 per cent of the votes).

The PML-N campaign was handicapped due to Nawaz Sharif-Maryam Nawaz having to rush to London in view of the deterioration of the health of Kulsoom Nawaz (Nawaz Sharif's Wife). They also extended their stay till the sentencing by the Accountability Court in the Avenfield property case. Quite possibly, their return on 13 July 2018 to go to jail was motivated by the necessity of filing an appeal against the verdict without which Maryam's political career would have been stymied even before it began. As a result they were not able to campaign during a critical period.

The PML-N worker and voters were also confused by the mixed signals coming from the Sharifs: Nawaz's taking on the establishment and Shahbaz pushing the conciliatory line. 'Good cop-bad cop' may be a useful tactic while in power but when seeking votes, such a tactic only served to puzzle the cadres and the voters. Shahbaz compounded this by being unwilling or unable to capitalise on Nawaz-Maryam's return to Pakistan. Clearly, Shahbaz, who has proved to be a good deputy to Nawaz and an

able administrator, will take time to mature as a leader in his own right.

For the PML-N, losing Punjab has been as big a blow as not being able to form a government at the Centre. For any agitation against alleged rigging, it would have needed the resources of the province. It would also have needed to be in power to handle the corruption investigations that are underway against its leadership. While Nawaz and Maryam Nawaz are already behind bars, Shahbaz Sharif is facing National Accountability Bureau (NAB) probe into the affairs of 56 public sector companies started by him that could embroil him. Traditionally, the PML-N has not done well in opposition. If Shahbaz continues to lead the party, it may do even worse and he may have a difficult time in keeping his flock together, especially if a resurgent Pervaiz Ellahi, the Speaker of the Punjab Assembly starts poaching on the PML-N for his own PML-Q.

### **Pakistan People's Party**

The PPP tally is 53 seats with the addition of nine reserved seats for women and two for minorities. It had secured 7.3 million votes in the 2002 general elections, 10.66 million in 2008, was reduced to 6.91 million votes in 2013 and 6.90 million in 2018 (approximately 13.5 per cent of the vote).

The PPP has retained its presence in Sindh, and marginally improved its overall national numbers. However, it has not been able to stage a come-back in Punjab. Many have written off the PPP in Punjab. However, Bilawal Bhutto's rallies in Punjab did generate hope for the party that it could stage a comeback in the future. It would take Bilawal Bhutto at least another one or two elections to develop a new identity and programme for his party beyond its present position as a regional party that makes occasional guest appearances in the rest of the country. He will have to make a fresh start in south Punjab and move upwards.

The PPP is likely to play its cards cautiously in supporting the PML-N in any protests that it may want to launch against the government. Its instinct for self-preservation would be to protect its own Government in Sindh.

### Religious Parties

Most commentators have highlighted that an important takeaway of the general elections was lack of seats that the radical parties won for the NA showing disconnect of the voters with hardline narrative. This issue, however, is far more complex. For one thing, irrespective of seats won, just by contesting, radical elements have been 'mainstreamed' and brought into the political milieu.

The religious parties collectively polled 5.2 million or 9.58 per cent of the total votes polled. In 2002, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) had achieved over 11 per cent and had managed to lead a provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

A further analysis reveals a more complex situation. The religious parties received the largest number of votes in Punjab (2.7 million) that constituted 7.98 per cent of overall votes in the province. In Sindh the religious parties received 1.1 million votes or 10.57 per cent of the total votes polled; in Balochistan they polled 16.78 per cent and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa they received 18.84 per cent of the votes polled.

Among the religious parties, the performance of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) was remarkable. Campaigning on a single-point agenda of *khatm-i-nabuwat* (finality of the prophethood) it secured 2.2 million votes for the NA out of the 5.2 million secured by all the religious parties. This has been unprecedented for a new religious party making its entry into national politics. In the Punjab Assembly elections, the TLP secured 1.8 million votes that were more than the 1.7 million votes won by the PPP. In the Sindh Assembly, the TLP secured 400,000 votes, almost double those of PML-N that secured just 230,000. In the process, the TLP won two provincial assembly seats. It is also significant that the TLP contested the elections on its own strength and did not either join a coalition or enter into any seat adjustments with even the MMA. This undoubtedly provides a good idea of their strength.

In Punjab, its 1.8 million votes out of the 2.7 million polled for all the religious parties constituted 69 per cent of the votes polled for such parties clearly showing the trajectory of support. In Sindh,

its candidates gave prominent leaders like PPP's Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Dr Farooq Sattar of Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM-P) a tough challenge. Overall, the TLP ate into PML-N's votes since Barelvi voters had traditionally been loyal to the PML-N.

The participation of Hafiz Saeed's Milli Muslim League (MML) Party on the platform of the Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek (AAT) was significant. Saeed had all along been opposed to participation in western-style democracy, calling it un-Islamic. Clearly, there were other forces at work that 'persuaded' him to change his stance against elections and democracy. The prospects of being 'mainstreamed' into the politics was perhaps too good an opportunity to be missed. Though the party did not win any seat, it got 1,71,356 votes for the NA and 2,36,386 votes for the Punjab Assembly. One reason for not being able to win has been ascribed to the fact that their supporters had not got registered as voters due to confusion about participation in elections.

Given the kind of vote share that these parties managed, it is certain that such 'mainstreamed' parties will only grow in strength from here on. In fact, their election management in terms of positioning sufficient volunteers at the polling stations and facilitating voters indicated the presence of solid constituency-level machinery. Based especially on the TLP's performance in Punjab and in Karachi, the message is that its radical ideology does resonate with millions in the electorate. It would be interesting to see how the PTI Government deals with these extremists. The concern expressed by many observers is that given Imran Khan's soft stance towards the religious right, such groups may get greater space in a 'Naya' Pakistan.

In terms of seats, the revived five-party MMA won 12 seats and 2.5 million votes for the NA. In 2002, the MMA had emerged as the country's third largest party with 3.1 million votes and 59 NA seats. Their best bet of doing well was in KPK but here the dominant party Jamait-Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal (JUI-F) ran into Imran's charisma and the achievements of his party during the past five years. There was also no new programme that the alliance was able to project to dent the PTI's support base. The

MMA unity, too, is under threat as a key component, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), is considering leaving the alliance.

Like other mainstream parties who lost, the TLP too claims that its mandate was robbed due to rigging. Chief of TLP, Khadim Rizvi has alleged that the 2018 general elections were the most rigged elections in the country's history. It has warned that the party will contest the results at every forum, even on the streets and will participate in the by-elections. It would be interesting to see if the mainstream opposition parties invite the TLP to join their anti-rigging campaign.

### **The Challenges before Imran Khan**

Imran Khan faces myriad challenges as he settles into governance. First and foremost is the fact that he is an untested politician and an untried administrator. His career, especially in the past five years, shows that he and the PTI have had more experience of agitating outside the Parliament than using Parliament effectively. His record as a Parliamentarian is worse than that of even Nawaz Sharif, having attended Parliament for less than ten per cent of its sessions. He has not participated in any parliamentary committee and thus does not know the inner workings of a parliamentary system. Not surprisingly, the performance of the PTI lawmakers has been below par.

The second challenge, now that a coalition has been stitched would be to keep the flock together, both at the Centre and in Punjab against the backdrop of a highly acrimonious and polarised environment. Infighting within the PTI between two stalwarts Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Jahangir Tareen could adversely impact the party's functioning. Imran will also have to satisfy the large number of 'electables', independents and allies from smaller parties on whose support he is dependent and who will claim their pound of flesh. Likewise, seeking the support of the MQM-P and the PML-Q, both of whom Imran Khan has been extremely critical of in the past, would have been a bitter pill to swallow. The PTI has eroded MQM-P's traditional vote bank in Karachi and so the moot point would be if the MQM would allow the PTI to consolidate its gains there. Managing the party and the coalition thus will require a lot of maturity and patience. Imran's

choice of key appointments at the Centre and the provinces would be critical in this regard.

The third challenge for Imran Khan would be to deal with an opposition that has been badly stung in the elections and has alleged rigging. The combined strength of the PML-N, PPP and MMA is 150 only two less than the PTI's own strength. They, especially the PML-N, are unlikely to forego any opportunity to pull Imran Khan down. Quite likely, they would pay him back using the same confrontational tactics that he had indulged in against the PML-N during the last five years. The difference would be that the opposition has a much stronger presence in the NA than the opposition had during the term of the PML-N Government. Undoubtedly, it would use its parliamentary strength to attack Imran Khan's Government. With a simple majority in the NA and only 12 out of 102 seats in the Senate, Imran would have to deal with the challenge of governing Pakistan with a thin parliamentary majority. He would have no option but to work with the opposition to get legislation passed. The silver lining for Imran is that the 11 party opposition unity may not last long. Already cracks have appeared on the issue of the PPP not supporting Shahbaz Sharif as the combined candidate for the Prime Minister. It would be quite an achievement if the PML-N and the PPP could work together for a sustained period.

The fourth challenge would be to deliver on the election promises and to fulfill the heightened expectations of his supporters for 'Naya Pakistan'. The thrust of the 'Naya Pakistan' is a country free from corruption and injustice. This is a hark back to the reason he entered politics in the first place: his one-point agenda of eradication of corruption from the country. Over the years many had scoffed at his single-point campaign but he pursued it with determination. However, in his bid to become PM he has collected politicians of different shades and hues in the PTI. These so-called 'electables' carry a baggage of corruption that contrasts with the kind of clean image that Imran is seeking to instill. People will be looking closely at his actions to see whether those in his close circle would be subjected to scrutiny or not and whether the promised '*tabdeeli*' (change) will take place or not. Managing these expectations would be a major test.

Some of the key points of his promises and a 100-day plan include generating 10 million jobs within five years; complete autonomy to south Punjab; building five million houses; transformation in governance, revitalisation of economic growth and ensuring the country's national security. There has been talk about setting up a national security organisation and a detailed national security policy. A key element of this would be to deal with the various terrorist organisations in the country, ensure implementation of the National Action Plan, curriculum reforms in schools, bring madrassas into the national mainstream and tackle the radicalisation in society. How Imran would balance these issues with his own pre-disposition of being soft on the militants and his reputation of being 'Taliban Khan' would be interesting to watch.

The fifth critical challenge for him would be to repair the distorted civil-military relations under Nawaz Sharif. In an interview Imran had stated "A democratic government should sit down and form its policy and then get the Army on board. If there is any impediment by the Army, I should be able to say, 'Look, I'm the Chief Executive'. And then, if I can't implement my policy, I should be able to say, 'Look, I can't do it, and I resign'." Being their favourite, the Army is bound to allow Imran space to govern, especially in the domestic arena. In areas that the Army considers its preserve, Imran Khan will find his freedom of action being constrained. A moot point is the extent to which the Army wanted to see Imran in power per se and how much it wanted to get rid of Nawaz Sharif and the PML-N. Most observers favour the latter viewpoint.

The sixth, and clearly the most daunting, challenge for the PTI would be the revival of the economy. Imran Khan has inherited an economy literally on a slippery slope. Soaring external financing requirements in the shape of re-payment of debt and a mounting import bill are the immediate issues that would need to be tackled. In fact, the grim reality facing the new government would be that debt servicing and defence account for about 55 per cent of the total Federal Government spending. Foreign currency reserves have declined to between USD 9-10 billion, covering less than two months of imports. The rupee has been devalued four



times since December 2017, fuelling inflation. Pakistan needs around USD11 billion to cater to its external financing gap in the on-going fiscal year and another USD 9.5 to USD 10 billion next year. With mounting debt payments in the coming months and years, handling the economic mess will not be an easy task.

An approach to the IMF for a USD 10 to 12 billion bailout seems on the cards. If Pakistan does approach the IMF and gets a bailout this year, it would far exceed its quota (based on the size of the economy of the country and its voting power in the IMF). Despite this, it will run into similar problems next year unless stringent and unpopular measures are taken to boost the economy. The US has already opposed any large IMF bailouts that would end up servicing Chinese loans. An IMF bail-out is expected to be accompanied by stiff conditions that could include: further devaluation of the currency, spending cuts, withdrawal of subsidies as well as tax reforms and removal of tax exemptions. The implementation of such measures would come up against PTI's election pledges that include increasing social spending, reducing taxes and lowering the cost of energy.

A central challenge for Imran Khan would be to seize the power of formulating and executing foreign policy. Both Asif Zardari as President and Nawaz Sharif as PM had burnt their fingers trying to make such efforts. To the extent that he has some space and time, will Imran Khan be able to convince the Army that the kind of financial investments required to sustain Pakistan's trajectory of being at odds with its eastern and western neighbours is no longer in Pakistan's interests?

Here the key challenges would be the relationships with Afghanistan, India and the US. A key point made by Imran in his victory speech was that for Pakistan to achieve its social and economic potential it must be at peace with its neighbours in the region. Though he appeared to be conciliatory calling for a dialogue with India, he also highlighted human rights violations in Kashmir and called it the 'core' issue. The PTI manifesto had linked the Kashmir issue to the United Nations Security Council resolutions. So the signals are mixed. In any case, the Army will

be looking over his shoulders to ensure that he does not step out of line.

Imran's assertion that "Peace in Afghanistan will mean there will be peace in Pakistan" and speaking about an open border with Afghanistan was well received. However, this is something that the Army would not be comfortable with since it is already building a fence to seal the border.

Ever since Donald Trump has become the US President, Pak-US relations have been on a downslide. The US has already signalled its opposition to any IMF bailout. Places for Pakistani military officials in the International Military Education and Training programme (IMET) have been closed. More than anything else, this symbolically represents a turning-point in the military-to-military relationship that has all along been strong. For his part, Imran has been openly critical of the way the United States has handled the war in Afghanistan and had opposed the use of drones. It will take a lot of sagacity on his part to rescue the relationship. How Pakistan deals with Afghanistan, especially in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, would be the key.

One way of improving relations with both India and Afghanistan would be for Imran to allow the transit of Indian goods to Afghanistan through Pakistan. Not only would this satisfy a long-standing Afghan demand but would create jobs in the service sectors of the Pakistan economy besides generating transit fees. The Army had previously opposed trade with India suspecting that Nawaz Sharif was looking for personal benefits and could use this as a means of sidelining the Kashmir issue. Imran Khan would have no such issues. Therefore, it would be interesting to see if there is forward movement in this area.

### **Conclusion**

Elections 2018 were according to most observers, one of the most controversial elections in Pakistan with allegations of pre-poll rigging and rigging on the election-day. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the European Union election observers held that the polls were less fair than in 2013.

The elections were billed as a contest between Imran Khan's 'Naya Pakistan' and his anti-corruption narrative and Nawaz Sharif's narrative of 'vote ko izzat do' and Shahbaz's narrative of development. In reality, however, it was contest between the Army's political engineering and the entrenched politics of patronage of the Sharif brothers. The Army's engineering proved to be more successful. Now that the elections are over and a new government is in power, the crucial question is whether Pakistan will see political stability against the backdrop of a wafer thin majority and a polarised polity.

Overall, Imran's honeymoon period may not last very long. His government will have to quickly get out of the campaign mode, shun politics of vengeance, deal with allegations of rigging elections maturely and ensure the legitimacy of the electoral process and of his own government. If Imran Khan's slogan of a 'Naya Pakistan' is to mean more than mere change of faces in the administration, he would have to tackle a broad range of challenges and that too quickly.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, Why Pakistan needs Imran Khan, Express Tribune Blogs, 20 June 2018, <https://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/68250/why-pakistan-needs-imran-khan/>, accessed 28 July 2018

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