

Pakistan

Elections 2024: Loss of Authority

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There is an old saying in Pakistan, that the military has never won a war and never lost an election, but that seems to have been given the lie in the General Elections of February 8, 2024. Despite pre-election manipulations, massive rigging and the perversion of results, the certain loser in these elections is the Military Establishment.

These elections, ‘sponsored’ by the ‘all powerful’ Army, have pushed an already chaos-wracked Pakistan closer to the edge. The results of the widely and blatantly rigged elections have thrown up a hung National Assembly. Of the four Provincial Assemblies – Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh – which went to polls along with the General Elections, Balochistan and Sindh have thrown up hung Assemblies. This outcome is despite the fact that the Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), demonstrably the most popular party in the country, was forced out of the elections by a range of legal and judicial manipulations.

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At the time of writing, a Military Establishment-backed coalition government of the Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari-led Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) was set to form the Government at the National Level as well as in Punjab and Sindh. However, PTI, which had been denied right to contest the election, but had put forward several party-backed independent candidates who have emerged winners, as well as other smaller opposition parties, have claimed massive rigging and manipulation of results, and are claiming right to form governments at the Centre, and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. They have launched nationwide protests which have remained non-violent till date, but may eventually take a violent, creating much wider unrest in the country, which was already going through a phase of rising chaos. The Military Establishment and the PML-N – PPP combine may celebrate their present and counterfeit victory, but this has only taken them another step forward, towards Pakistan's long and inexorable degeneration.

GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

The results, bitterly contested and challenged, declared on February 11, 2024, recorded that Independent Candidates won the maximum number of seats, 101, of which 93 were won by PTI-backed candidates alone. This was followed by the PML-N, 75; PPP, 54; Muttahida Qomi Movement – Pakistan (MQM-P), 17; Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), five; Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP), three each; Balochistan National Party (BNP), two; Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM), Pakistan Muslim League-Z, Balochistan Awami Party, National Party and Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party, one each.

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Political Party	National Assembly (NA) Seats Won
Independents (PTI backed)	93
PML-N	75
PPP	54
MQM-P	17
Independents	8
JUI-F	5
PML	3
IPP	3
BNP	2
PML-Z	1
MWM	1
BAP	1
NP	1
PKMAP	1
Total*	265

*Total 266 seats. Election on one seat (NA-8) cancelled.

The General Elections for 265 out of 266 National Assembly seats were held on February 8, 2024. Polling on one seat was postponed after the death of a candidate. The National Assembly now comprises 336 seats, with 266 determined through direct voting, and 70 reserved seats (60 for women and 10 for minorities) allocated on the basis of each party's strength in the house.¹

1 Earlier the National Assembly had 272 seats. However, based on the results of the national census conducted in 2023, the constituencies went through a delimitation process. The boundaries of many constituencies were altered and the number of seats was reduced from 272 to 266. Al Jazeera, "Pakistan election 2024: Live results", February 9, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/9/pakistan-election-2024-live-results#:~:text=Breakdown%20of%20national%20seats,reduced%20from%20272%20to%20266.>

PROVINCE WISE RESULTS

The 266 General Assembly seats were spread across four provinces – Balochistan (16), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (45), Punjab (141), Sindh (61) – and Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT, three seats). PTI-backed independents won 38 National Assembly seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 54 in Punjab and one in Balochistan. The other two major parties PML-N and PPP won four and two seats respectively in Balochistan, two and one in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 67 and seven in Punjab, none and 44 in Sindh, and two and none in Islamabad Capital Territory.

Name of Party	Punjab	Sindh	Balochistan	KP	ICT	Total
Independents (PTI backed)	54	0	1	38	0	93
PML-N	67	0	4	2	2	75
PPP	7	44	2	1	0	54
Independents	5	0	1	1	1	8
JUI-F	0	0	3	2	0	5
MWM	0	0	0	1	0	1
PML	3	0	0	0	0	3
IPP	3	0	0	0	0	3
PML-Z	1	0	0	0	0	1
MQM-P	0	17	0	0	0	17
BAP	0	0	1	0	0	1
BNP	0	0	2	0	0	2
NP	0	0	1	0	0	1
PKMAP	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	140	61	16	45	3	265

The significant and unprecedented success of PTI-backed candidates in Punjab clearly undermined the authority of the deep state which boasts of having massive, indeed unchallenged, support in the Punjab Province.

PROVINCIAL ELECTION RESULTS

In the simultaneous elections held for Provincial Assemblies of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Punjab and Sindh, PTI supported independents emerged winners with 80 seats out of a total of 115 direct voting seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In Punjab, though PPP won a maximum of 138 seats out of 297, it was closely followed by PTI supported independents at 116 seats. PPP won a maximum of 83 out of 130 in Sindh, and 11 out of 51 in Balochistan.

Name of Party	Punjab	Sindh	Balochistan	KP	Total
IND.	116	11	0	80	207
PML-N	138	0	9	5	152
PPP	10	83	11	4	108
IND	22	3	5	7	37
MQM-P	0	27	0	0	27
JUI-F	0	1	8	7	16
PML	7	0	0	0	7
BAP	0	0	4	0	4
NP	0	0	3	0	3
TLP	1	0	0	0	1
IPP	1	0	0	0	1
PML-Z	1	0	0	0	1
GDA	0	3	0	0	3
JUI	0	2	0	0	2
JUI-P	0	0	1	3	4
PTI	0	0	0	2	2
PTI-P	0	0	0	2	2
ANP	0	0	2	1	3
BNP	0	0	1	0	1
BNP-A	0	0	1	0	1
Total	296	130	45	111	582

ALLEGATIONS OF RIGGING

On the day of elections, there was nationwide suspension of mobile phone and internet services. Justifying the action, the Federal Ministry of Interior stated that it had decided to “temporarily suspend mobile services across the country” in light of the “deteriorating security situation”.²

However, all major political parties, including the PPP, opposed this action, fearing that it was intended to help rigging.³ The PML-N – the Establishment’s apparent ‘selection’ – however, maintained silence.

In a letter to the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Qazi Faez Isa PPP’s Central Election Cell in-charge Senator Taj Haider argued that the government’s move to suspend mobile phone services on grounds of security concerns was ‘illegal’, as it violated a 2018 court order. The letter further claimed that “all political parties, except PML-N, have objected” to the internet disruption and rued that “in spite of our request to ECP [Election Commission of Pakistan] to restore services, these services have not been restored.”⁴

Shortly after the services went down, PTI declared on X, “Pakistanis, the illegitimate, fascist regime has blocked cell phone services across Pakistan on polling day,”⁵ and

2 Dawn, “Mobile services suspended ‘temporarily’ across country: interior ministry”, February 8, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1812142>.

3 Maryam Nawaz, “Supreme Court throws out petition seeking re-election”, *The News International*, February 21, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1159974-supreme-court-throws-out-petition-seeking-re-election>.

4 “Pakistan: Internet Outage Mars General Election, Draws Criticism From Political Parties, Except PML(N)”, *The Wire*, February 8, 2024, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/pakistan-general-election-internet-outage-pmln>.

5 Ayaz Gul and Sarah Zaman, “Pakistan Tallies Election Results After Controversial Polls”, *Voice of America*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-disrupts-mobile-and-internet-services-on-election-day/7479113.html>.

claimed that the suspension of mobile and internet services was “an organised conspiracy to deprive the people of their constitutional right to cast their vote... The purpose of shutting down mobile phone services is to prevent evidence of rigging at polling stations from coming to the fore. The nation will not accept such systematic rigging attempts on the day of the polls.”⁶

Nawaz Khokhar, an independent candidate for the National Assembly in Islamabad, argued,

Shutting down mobile networks on polling day is the beginning of election day rigging. Cutting candidates off from their agents and staff on election day is unacceptable. How’s one supposed to keep a check and highlight any irregularity? By the time news comes out, [the] election would have been stolen.⁷

Further, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), in a report titled *A Tainted Election Pakistan at the Polls*⁸, released on February 17, noted,⁹

Reports from HRCP’s election observers, who carried out spot-checks across 51 constituencies, indicate that the countrywide internet and cellular services shutdown on polling day and arbitrary changes in polling information compromised voters’ access to polling stations. This was particularly true for women with restricted mobility, persons living with disabilities, the elderly, and low-income voters. Of particular concern

6 The Wire, op. cit.

7 Ayaz Gul and Sarah Zaman, op. cit.

8 HRCP, “A Tainted Election”, 2024, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-A-Tainted-Election.pdf>.

9 HRCP, “HRCP releases 2024 election report, demands independent audit”, February 17, 2024, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/hrcp-releases-2024-election-report-demands-independent-audit/>.

is the protracted delay in announcement of election results by the returning officers.

It further observed,

...the post-polling process was clearly unsatisfactory. In a fifth of all polling stations observed by HRCP, the presiding officer did not affix the statement of the count in a conspicuous place for public display or was not seen transmitting a photograph of the result to the returning officer and ECP. It was alleged in many instances that the returning officer's announcement did not tally with the presiding officer's count. Worryingly, reports of candidates, polling agents and observers being denied permission to witness the provisional consolidation of results, also surfaced.

Justifying the fears of the opposition parties and independents, many journalists also criticised this move. Arifa Noor, a prime-time political talk show host on the *Dawn* news channel, stated on a live broadcast, "There are no two opinions about it: This measure was designed to manipulate election results and restrict news coverage. That's what it is."¹⁰

Indeed, on February 16, PTI Central Information Secretary Raof Hasan, at a press conference, declared, the February 8 General Elections would be remembered as the "biggest vote fraud" in Pakistan's history against his party and its candidates. He claimed, "According to our estimates, only 92 [National Assembly seats] have been given to us out of 177 seats which were supposed to be ours. And 85 seats have been taken away from us fraudulently," adding that the party was taking constitutional and legal steps in this regard. "We have verified data about 46 seats and it is being compiled for 39 seats." The PTI spokesperson stated, further, that the party had

10 Ayaz Gul and Sarah Zaman, op. cit.

three ways to ascertain alleged rigging in the polls, including discrepancies between Form 45 and Form 47.¹¹

During the same press conference, PTI's Seemabia Tahir played a video of alleged rigging in the polls and stated,

We got 1.25m [million] votes in Karachi [but] we did not get a single seat. Jamaat-i-Islami received 700,000 votes and not a single National Assembly seat in Karachi. In Punjab, we got 13.6m votes and we were given 55 seats. This is a joke with the people of Pakistan. Showing graphics on a large screen, she said] at 3am [PST] on Feb 9, the PTI had won 154 seats in the National Assembly while the PML-N and PPP had won 47 each.¹²

She added that the party was winning 42 seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, of which some were stolen and the party was handed 37. From Islamabad, the party was winning three and all three were stolen. In Punjab, PTI-backed Independents were winning 115, but eventually only 55 were given to them. In Balochistan they were getting four, but were given one.¹³

‘PROOF’ OF RIGGING

In a damning development, Rawalpindi Commissioner Liaquat Ali Chattha, who was subsequently transferred to the Services and General Administration Department (SGAD) in Lahore, and later resigned, on February 17, 2024, admitted rigging the polls and alleged that the candidates who were losing the elections “were made to win” and that the process to justify the manipulated results was on still going in “an

11 Pakistan Today, “PTI decries ‘historic vote fraud’; says 85 NA seats ‘snatched’”, February 16, 2024, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2024/02/16/pti-decries-historic-vote-fraud-says-85-na-seats-snatched/>.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

organised manner at some offices”. He accused the Chief Election Commissioner of Pakistan, Sikandar Sultan Raja, and Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Qazi Faez Isa, of being a part of the “rigging plan.” Chattha claimed the candidates ahead by up to 70,000 votes were declared runner-up as a result of rigging. Taking responsibility for supervising the theft of the public mandate by changing the results of 13 National Assembly constituencies in six districts of Rawalpindi Division, he stated,

I am taking responsibility for all this wrongdoing and telling you that the chief election commissioner and the chief justice are also completely involved in this. We made independent candidates... lose by putting on fake stamps. I should be punished for the injustice... should be hanged to death at Kutchery Chowk and others who were involved in this injustice should also be punished.¹⁴

He further disclosed that he decided to resign as he was unable to sleep at night after “stabbing the country in its back” and advised the bureaucracy to stop accepting “illegal orders”.¹⁵

Rejecting the allegations¹⁶ the ECP formed¹⁷ a ‘high-level committee’ to investigate Chattha’s the claims. CJP Qazi Faez Isa also rejected the accusations.¹⁸

Earlier, on February 12, Jamaat-i-Islami-Fazl Karachi chief Hafiz Naemur forfeited his seat in the Sindh Assembly, which

14 Aamir Yasin, “Official shunted after rigging bombshell”, *Dawn*, February 18, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1815126>.

15 Ibid.

16 “ECP refutes Rawalpindi commissioner’s allegations, initiates inquiry”, *The Express Tribune*, February 17, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2456748/ecp-refutes-rawalpindi-commissioners-allegations-initiates-inquiry>.

17 Aamir Yasin, op. cit.

18 Saima Shabbir, “In rare media interaction, Pakistan’s top judge refutes rigging allegations raised against him by senior bureaucrat”, *Arab News*, February 17, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2461631/pakistan>.

he won in February 8 elections. He stated that “a PTI-backed independent candidate has won” and therefore “I will not avail this seat.” He disclosed that PTI-backed independent candidate Saif Bari had won according to his team’s calculations, stating that the winning candidate’s votes were “reduced to 11,000 from 31,000.” According to the results released by the ECP, Naeem won from the Provincial Seat (PS)-129 constituency (Karachi Central VIII) with 26,296 votes. MQM-P’s Muaz Muqaddam was the runner-up, with 20,296 votes.¹⁹

THE COURT’S INTERVENTIONS

On February 19, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) suspended the notifications which declared results of three National Assembly (NA) seats – NA-46, NA-47 and NA-48 – falling under the Islamabad Capital Territory. Subsequent to the ECP announcement declaring Anjum Aqeel Khan (PML-N), Tariq Fazal Chaudhry (PML-N) and Raja Khurram Nawaz Khan (Independent) as winners to the three seats, respectively, the respective PTI-backed candidates from these constituencies had challenged the ECP’s notification.²⁰ Amir Mughal, Mohammad Shoaib Shaheen and Mohammad Ali Bukhari had contested from these constituencies as independent candidates with the support of PTI.

Meanwhile, on February 21, the Supreme Court (SC) dismissed a plea seeking re-election and annulment of the February 8 polls over the issue of alleged rigging. A three-member SC bench led by CJP Qazi Faez Isa, comprising Justice Musarrat Hilali and Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar, conducted the hearing on Brig. (Retd) Ali Khan’s petition.

19 Dawn, “Irate Hafiz Naeem, GDA forfeit Sindh Assembly seats over alleged rigging”, February 12, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1813575>.

20 Malik Asad and Munawer Azeem, “Court suspends ‘victories’ on all three capital seats”, *Dawn*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1815648>.

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Interestingly, the petition was dismissed as the petitioner fled the country after moving the apex court and did not appear during the hearing. “Look at this petitioner [who] left the country after filing the application in the court,” CJP Qazi Faez Isa noted, while commenting on the officer’s email sent to the court regarding his being out of the country.²¹

PRELUDE TO ELECTIONS

These results are a clear and dramatic setback for the ‘all powerful’ Military Establishment in Pakistan, which had done everything possible to bring back its protégé-turned-foe-turned-protégé Nawaz Sharif to power again. To this end, the Establishment first helped the then-combined opposition under the banner of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) sustain an orchestrated street mobilisation and protests against the then Prime Minister Imran Khan – another protégé turned foe – leading to the build-up of a political situation which helped the Establishment topple Imran’s government in April 2022. Subsequently, a PDM Government was installed under Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz’s brother, which later handed over power to an Interim Government, led by caretaker Prime Minister Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar, in the run-up to the elections.

In the interim, Imran Khan was sent to jail, convicted on multiple ‘corruption’ charges, his party was banned from participating in the elections, and its election symbol was withdrawn by a pliant Election Commission of Pakistan.

PTI’S RETALIATION AND ARMY’S RESPONSE

The chronic political disorders in Pakistan turned into a full-blown crisis with the arrest of Imran Khan on May 9, 2023, from inside the courtroom “for the crime of corruption” in the

21 Maryam Nawaz, *op. cit.*

Al-Qadir Trust headed by him and his wife Bushra Bibi.²² Imran had appeared before a court in Islamabad, the national capital. It was one of the 143 ongoing cases against him. After being released from jail on May 12, subsequent to the Islamabad High Court (IHC) granting bail earlier in the day, while hailing the judiciary, a buoyant Khan continued with his tirade against the Army, declaring, “it’s not the security institution, it is just one man, the Army Chief” who was responsible for his arrest, adding, “there is no democracy in the Army.”²³ Imran, however, has been languishing in jail since his arrest from his residence in Lahore on August 5, 2023, after he was handed a three-year prison sentence in one of the Toshakhana cases.²⁴ Though his party called for peaceful protests against the decision, there was only a limited public response²⁵ as the military crackdown after the May 9 violence was still fresh in peoples’ minds. Imran was also arrested in Cypher Case on August 15, 2023.²⁶ He is currently serving a 14 year sentence in another Toshakhana case and 10 years in the Cypher Case.²⁷

22 Abid Hussain, “Former Pakistani PM Imran Khan arrested at Islamabad court”, *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/9/former-pakistan-pm-imran-khan-arrested-outside-islamabad-court>.

23 “Pakistan ex-PM Imran Khan leaves court after being granted”, *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2023, bail <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/12/pakistan-ex-pm-imran-khan-granted-bail-after-unlawful-arrest>.

24 “Why was Pakistan’s former Prime Minister Imran Khan arrested?”, *Al Jazeera*, August 5, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/5/why-was-pakistans-former-prime-minister-imran-khan-arrested>.

25 Mubasher Bukhari, Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam and Charlotte Greenfield, “Imran Khan arrested after Pakistan court sentences ex-prime minister to three years in jail”, *Reuters*, August 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/police-arrest-former-pm-imran-khan-after-court-gives-three-year-prison-sentence-2023-08-05/>.

26 Terence J Sigamony, “Cypher, Toshakhana cases: IK, Bushra challenge their sentences”, *Business Recorder*, February 17, 2024, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40289267>.

27 Omer Farooq Khan, “Imran, wife jailed for 14 years in Toshakhana case”, *The Times of India*, February 1, 2024,

Meanwhile, immediately after the arrest on May 9, which his party termed an abduction by the State Forces from the courtroom, PTI cadres and supporters unleashed large-scale violence. Though Pakistan has a long history of political leaders being jailed or killed or ousted from power by the Army, never before had the retaliation been so strong. Soon after Khan's arrest in Islamabad, protests erupted in Islamabad and spread rapidly to other parts of the country, including major cities such as Rawalpindi, Lahore, Karachi, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Multan, Peshawar and Mardan. Crowds of protesters, mostly PTI supporters, chanting *Allahu Akbar* and *Nara-e-Takbeer* lined up on the streets of Pakistan, going on a rampage against security establishments and personnel. In the most daring and unprecedented attack, which may have a long-lasting impact on the Army's position in Pakistan, protestors stormed the General Headquarters of the Pakistan Army in the garrison city of Rawalpindi²⁸ – the absolute seat of the Army's power. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Headquarters in Islamabad also came under attack. The Corps Commander's residence in Lahore was ransacked and vandalized.²⁹ Several videos on social media depicting pictures of mayhem across Pakistan flooded the Internet, as violent protests spread.

Perturbed by the unprecedented violence targeting the Army, the government, on the same day, May 9, restricted mobile internet services across the country and prohibited the use of social media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Twitter*,

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/imran-wife-jailed-for-14-years-in-toshakhana-case/articleshow/107302812.cms>.

28 Lingamgunta Nirmitha Rao, "Imran Khan's supporters storm Pakistan Army headquarters hours after his arrest, *Hindustan Times*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/imran-khans-arrest-sparks-riots-arson-across-pakistan-supporters-protest-101683642268525.html#:~:text=In%20unprecedented%20scenes%2C%20supporters%20of,arrest%20in%20a%20corruption%20case.>

29 Ibid.

Instagram and *Facebook*.³⁰ The services were restored across the country on May 13.³¹ Meanwhile, according to reports at least 10 people were killed and several hundred wounded, including Army and Police officers, during the violence. Khan, however, alleged that that ‘live fire’ by SFs had killed at least 40 protesters.³²

Subsequent to the violence, on May 12, Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir declared,

Armed Forces will not tolerate any further attempt of violating the sanctity and security of its installations or vandalism and resolved to bring to justice all the planners, abettors, instigators and executors of vandalism on the Black Day of 9th May.

Indeed, SFs unleashed a crackdown against the PTI. Top PTI leaders, including Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Fawad Chaudhry, Asad Umar and Omer Cheema, were taken into custody within 24 hours of the beginning of the protest and transferred to Adiala Jail under detention for 15 days. Within days, over 1,800 PTI leaders and supporters were rounded up.³³ The number later increased to over 5,000.³⁴ Moreover, the

30 Irfan Sadozai, “Mobile broadband suspended across country on interior ministry’s instructions: PTA”, *Dawn*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1751826>.

31 Kalbe Ali, “Mobile data services restored”, *Dawn*, May 13, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1752787>.

32 Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan: Pro-Khan Violent Protesters to Face Terror Trials”, *Voice of America*, May 13, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-pro-khan-violent-protesters-to-face-terror-trials/7092139.html>.

33 “PTI top brass sent to Adiala Jail for 15 days”, *The Express Tribune*, May 11, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2416145/pti-top-brass-sent-to-adiala-jail-for-15-days>.

34 Asif Shahzad, “Insight: Repeated arrests, filthy cells: Inside Pakistan’s crackdown”, *Reuters*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/repeated-arrests-filthy-cells-inside-pakistans-crackdown-2023-06-06/>.

army tried to systematically break up Khan's party, eventually leading to an exodus of several top PTI leaders from the party.³⁵

The Establishment through its 'proxies', like the ECP, later ensured that PTI could not participate in the elections. Accordingly, a five-member panel of the ECP on December 22, 2023, declared the party ineligible to obtain an election symbol to contest the General Elections. It 'argued',

It is held that PTI has not complied with our directions rendered therein order dated November 23 and failed to hold intra-party election following PTI prevailing Constitution, 2019 and Election Act, 2017, and Election Rules, 2017.³⁶

Later, on January 13, 2024, the Supreme Court, in a live telecast, endorsed the ECP's decision prohibiting PTI from retaining the bat symbol, citing alleged irregularities in internal party elections.³⁷

During this entire phase of military crackdown, the nature and sheer endurance of Imran Khan's defiance was unprecedented, as were his direct attacks on the Army Chief, General Asif Munir, as well as his predecessor, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Khan also openly accused the Army of plotting the ouster of his government, as well as the failed assassination attempt on him in November 2022.

35 Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, "Imran Khan's political games leave him isolated as Pakistan army destroys party", *The Guardian*, June 3, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/03/pakistan-imran-khan-pti-military-crackdown>.

36 "Imran Khan's party to challenge 'flawed' ECP verdict on intra-party polls, electoral symbol in high court", *The Indian Express*, December 25, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/pakistan/imran-khan-pti-election-commission-polls-peshawar-9082320/>.

37 Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan's PTI Barred From Using Cricket Bat Electoral Symbol", *Voice of America*, January 14, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-s-pti-barred-from-using-cricket-bat-electoral-symbol-/7439552.html>.

Through Pakistan's history, the Army leadership stood as an unshakeable phalanx against all other forces in the country – in particular against political parties. Reports from Pakistan, however, indicated that this time around there was significant division within the Army leadership, fractures that have extended deep into Army families. Crucially, the Army's legitimacy – though not its capacity for coercive action – appears to have ebbed. Imran Khan's popularity remained undiminished.³⁸

Not surprisingly, despite all odds, the PTI did remarkably well in elections.

It is significant that Nawaz Sharif had been forced into exile in 2019 by a slew of corruption case, and had been banned from participating in elections 'for life'. The ban was abruptly lifted by the Supreme Court on January 8, 2024, paving the way for an engineered return to power.

GOVERNMENT FORMATION

Within days of declaration of provisional results and amidst complete chaos, with just 75 seats in the National Assembly, Nawaz Sharif announced himself the victor and staked his party's claim to form the Government. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari of the PPP, with 54 seats, proclaimed that his party would join a PML-N led government, to "bring political stability" to Pakistan.³⁹ Significantly, the combined total of the two parties, at 129, was still below the minimum of 133 required to secure

38 Ajai Sahni, "Pakistan More Fragile than Ever, Army's Image Diminished", *Wars Within Borders Occasional writings on Sub conventional conflicts*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.satp.org/publication/ajaisahni/WarWithinBorderDetails.aspx?Id=347>.

39 "New govt pivots around PPP: Bilawal", *The Express Tribune*, February 11, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2456097/new-govt-pivots-around-ppp-bilawal>.

a majority, and reports indicated that a process of poaching on the Independents had commenced immediately.⁴⁰

On February 20, the PML-N and PPP reached an agreement on forming a government in the Centre as both sides agreed on a “power-sharing formula” following days of negotiations. “PPP and PML-N have achieved the required number and now we are in a position to form the government in Centre,” PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari announced at a joint presser. Bilawal pointed out that PTI-backed candidates and the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) had failed to achieve a simple majority to form the government at the Centre.⁴¹

Reacting to the announcement, PTI Barrister Gohar Ali Khan stated, on February 21, that the party should be given its “constitutional right” to form governments at the Centre, and in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, given the public mandate conferred by the General Elections. In a message on X, Gohar asserted, “The country’s future was linked with complete supremacy of the constitution. The country always engulfed in crisis whenever it derailed from Constitution... Daylight robbery of public mandate is a desecration of votes.”⁴²

However, the PML-N has now emerged as the largest parliamentary party with 108 members. While nine independents joined it, it also secured 20 reserved seats for

40 “Former Pak PM Sharif’s PML-N party secures support of five more independent candidates”, *The Times of India*, February 12, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/former-pak-pm-sharifs-pml-n-party-secures-support-of-five-more-independent-candidates/articleshow/107629047.cms>.

41 Zulfiqar Ahmad, “PTI steps up efforts to form govts at centre, in Punjab, KP”, *Business Recorder*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40290090/pti-steps-up-efforts-to-form-govts-at-centre-in-punjab-kp#:~:text=ISLAMABAD%3A%20The%20chairman%20Pakistan%20Tehreek,in%20Feb%2008%20general%20elections.>

42 Ibid.

women and four for minorities. The PPP final tally increased to 68, after the addition of 12 reserved seats for women and two for minorities. The combined total of the alliance (176 seats) crosses the magic number 169, needed for government formation.⁴³ Meanwhile, the PML-N and the PPP agreed to join hands with other political parties including MQM-P, IPP, PML and BAP, for a coalition government, in pursuit of a 2/3rd majority.⁴⁴

With the Establishment backing them, there was little doubt that a PML-N – PPP combine, with support from some other parties as well a few independents, would form a ‘unity government’, as had happened after the ouster of Imran Khan in April 2022. The possibility of the new government securing a 2/3rd majority with Establishment’s support is also strong.

At the Provincial level, PML-N formed the government in Punjab, where Maryam Nawaz Sharif, the daughter of Nawaz Sharif, was elected as the first woman Chief Minister of a Pakistani province on February 26. PPP’S Murad Ali Shah became the Chief Minister of Sindh on February 27.⁴⁵ The process of government formation was still on in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at the time of writing.

While Balochistan and Sindh had been under caretaker governments since August 2023, after the completion of the terms of the Provincial Assembly, in Punjab and Khyber

43 Asim Yasin, “Six-party alliance falling short of two-thirds majority in NA”, *Geo News*, February 25, 2024, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/532509-six-party-alliance-falling-short-of-two-thirds-majority-in-na>.

44 Ibid.

45 Ali Raza, et. al. “Murad becomes Sindh CM for record consecutive 3rd time: Maryam elected as first-ever woman CM of Punjab”, *The News International*, February 27, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1161937-murad-becomes-sindh-cm-for-record-consecutive-3rd-time-maryam-elected-as-first-ever-woman-cm-of-punjab>.

Pakhtunkhwa the caretake government had been in office since January 2023. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly was dissolved on January 18, 2023, after the Governor, Haji Ghulam Ali, accepted the request for dissolution of the Assembly by the then PTI Chief Minister Mahmood Khan.⁴⁶ Four days earlier, on January 14, 2023, the Punjab Assembly was dissolved following a request by the ruling PTI. Through these actions, Imran Khan wanted to put pressure on the Federal Government for an early General Election,⁴⁷ which was otherwise scheduled for October 2023, though it was finally held in February 2024.

OPPOSITION PROTEST

Following near unsuccessful attempts to form the government, PTI earlier opted to sit in the Opposition in Parliament. PTI leader Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif announced on February 16 that, following Imran Khan's instructions, the party had decided to sit in the Opposition, both at the Centre and in the key province of Punjab. The decision came a day after the party had named Umar Ayub Khan as its candidate for Prime Minister and Aslam Iqbal as chief minister for Punjab. The party also launched nationwide protests against alleged electoral irregularities.⁴⁸

46 Alind Chauhan, "Provincial assemblies of Pakistan's Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa dissolved: What will happen now?", *The Indian Express*, January 20, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/pakistan-punjab-khyber-pakhtunkhwa-provincial-assemblies-dissolved-explained-8394617/>.

47 Abid Hussain, "Another Khan party-led provincial assembly dissolved in Pakistan", *Al Jazeera*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/18/another-khan-party-led-provincial-assembly-dissolved-in-pakistan#:~:text=On%20Saturday%2C%20the%20assembly%20in,scheduled%20in%20October%20this%20year.>

48 "Imran Khan's party vows nationwide protest against alleged election rigging, to join opposition in Pak's parliament", *Firstpost*, February 17, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/imran-khans-party-to-launch-natio>

A HISTORY OF STOLEN ELECTIONS

Though Pakistan was formed in 1947, the first General Elections were held much later, in 1970. Since then, the Military Establishment has ensured that the results⁴⁹ lead to the formation of a ‘civilian’ government which would work as its puppet.⁵⁰

Held on December 7, 1970, the first General Elections resulted,⁵¹ many believe, in the division of the country a year later, in 1971. Raza Naeem explains,

Voting took place in 300 constituencies, of which 162 were in East Pakistan and 138 in West Pakistan. The Awami League was the only major party in the east wing, while in the west wing, the PPP faced competition from the conservative factions of the Muslim League – the largest of which was Muslim League (Qayyum), as well as Islamist parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP). The result was a victory for the Awami League, which won an absolute majority of 160 seats, all of which were in East Pakistan. The PPP won only 81 seats, all in West Pakistan. In the provincial elections held ten days later, the Awami League again dominated in East Pakistan, while the PPP won

nwide-protest-against-alleged-election-rigging-joins-opposition-in-paks-parliament-13737372.html.

49 Gallup Pakistan, “Election Studies- Digital Library (1970-2013)”, https://gallup.com.pk/bb_old_site/election_DigitalLib.php#p213.

50 Rishika Singh, “Why Pakistan’s military is the biggest player in the country’s politics”, *The Indian Express*, February 9, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/pakistan-elections-military-army-dominance-influence-9151188/>.

51 Gilani’s Index of Electoral Record, “Volume 1 Pakistan National Election 1970”, April 30, 2023, https://gallup.com.pk/bb_old_site/election/IGIER1970.pdf.

Punjab and Sindh. The Marxist National Awami Party emerged victorious in the Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan. The National Assembly was initially not inaugurated as the military dictator Yahya Khan and the PPP chairman Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did not want a party from East Pakistan heading the federal government. Instead, Yahya appointed the veteran Bengali politician Nurul Amin as prime minister, asking him to reach a compromise between the PPP and Awami League. However, this move failed as the delay in inauguration had already caused significant unrest in East Pakistan. The situation escalated into a civil war that led to the breakup of Pakistan and the formation of the independent state of Bangladesh. The assembly was eventually inaugurated in 1972 after Yahya resigned and handed power to Bhutto. Bhutto became prime minister in 1973 after the post was recreated by a new constitution.⁵²

Similar, military intervention in subsequent elections created an environment conducive to the military establishment's indirect rule. Significantly, after 1970, five successive governments, were voted into power, but none of them was voted out of power — all five were removed by the Army, before they completed their terms, through explicit or implicit presidential orders.⁵³ This pattern continued till the formation of the military-backed Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid-e-Azam (PML-QA) government in November 2002.

52 Raza Naeem, “The Watershed Moment in 1970 Elections That Broke Pakistan”, *The Wire*, December 7, 2020, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/elections-that-broke-pakistan-1970-history>.

53 Congressional Research Service, “Pakistan’s 2008 Elections: Results and Implications for U.S. Policy”, April 9, 2008, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL34449.html>.

The last elections under a ‘military’ ruler were conducted in 2002. The PML-QA won 76 seats and emerged as the single largest party.

Under the circumstances – within a reasonable margin of error – it is safe to suggest that the electoral outcome is substantially an approximation of what the General [General Pervez Musharraf] intended. He has a hung Parliament, with the Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid-e-Azam (PML-QA), widely referred to as the ‘King’s Party’ because of the explicit support it enjoys from (and unqualified support it offers to) President Musharraf, emerging as the single largest faction in the National Assembly. Interestingly, the EU’s observers stated that the PML-QA had been one of the main beneficiaries of official attempts to interfere in the election. There is also some evidence to suggest that the results in the NWFP and Baluchistan were not quite as surprising as they are being made out to be, and one of the constituent members of the MMA (Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal), the Markazi Jamiat Ahle Hadith, has declared the alliance mandate to be ‘bogus’, claiming that it had been ‘given’ seats to create political instability in the country through a hung Parliament. This goes some way to confirm former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto’s claim that the frontier provinces were ‘handed over’ to the MMA and that, “Strategically, the military wants to hold a red rag up to the West and say ‘Look West, you need a military dictatorship, because if there’s not, then pro-Taliban parties are going to come to power.’” The alacrity with which the PML-QA President, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi declared that the MMA was “the natural ally” of his party also suggests a measure of understanding between the

two formations... As the processes of government formation are engineered, however, it is clear that the ‘King’s Party’ will have a controlling function in the new administration at the Centre, and would also form a government in the crucial State of Punjab – which accounts for 60 per cent of the country’s population and a dominant proportion of the Pakistan Army, and that constitutes the core of the power of the state in Pakistan.⁵⁴

The PML-QA later combined with the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the six party Islamist fundamentalist alliance, and formed the government. The alacrity with which the PML-QA President, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi declared that the MMA was “the natural ally” of his party also suggests a measure of understanding between the two formations. It further enhanced the military-*mullah* nexus in the country.

As the overall situation started to deteriorate, General Musharraf started facing strong opposition within the country and even feared impeachment. He eventually resigned in August 2008.⁵⁵ Prior to that, in the General Elections held in February 2008, he tried to ensure that the military remain ‘out of direct power’ to save it from public backlash. Accordingly, in the 2008 elections the PPP emerged as the single largest party with 87 National Assembly seats, while PML-N won 67 seats and became ‘runner-up’. PML-QA won 41 seats.⁵⁶ The PPP leader Yousaf Raza Gilani became the Prime Minister.

54 Ajai Sahni, “Dictator’s Democracy”, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol. 1, No. 13, October 14, 2002, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-1-No-13>.

55 Saeed Shah, “Pervez Musharraf resigns as president of Pakistan”, *The Guardian*, August 18, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/18/pakistan>.

56 South Asia Terrorism Portal, “Elections 2008 – Results”, <https://old.satp.org/satporctp/countries/pakistan/database/election2008.htm>.

The Pakistani academic Aqil Shah wrote in his book ‘The Army and the Democracy’,⁵⁷

In 2007-2008, the military extricated itself from power in the face of anti-regime protests... Since 2008, the generals have tolerated political democracy because direct military rule has been seen as antithetical to the military’s image and interests. In almost pendulum-like fashion, it appears the military has gone from governorship back to guardianship.

After the 2013 General Elections, there was an air of triumph and hope in Pakistan. A near-decisive victory for a single party and the astonishing spectacle of an ordered transition of power from one civilian Government to another – unprecedented in Pakistan’s twisted history, produced euphoria and an expectation that all that is to come can only be better than the benighted past.⁵⁸ Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif – who had been deposed in a coup by then Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf in 1999 – became Prime Minister for the third term. PML-N won 125 seats, PTI 34, and the incumbent PPP had virtually been wiped out, with just 32 seats to show. Other smaller parties and independent candidates had won or established leads in the remaining seats.⁵⁹

Many analysts then thought of the 2013 elections as a game changer for Pakistan as a nation, since the 13th Parliament completed its tenure uninterrupted and the elections for the new Parliament were conducted under the aegis of a civilian caretaker Government. They claimed that it was the first civilian transition of Government – though some would claim

57 Rishika Singh, op. cit.

58 Ajit Kumar Singh, “Misplaced Optimism”, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, May 13, 2013, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-11-No-45>.

59 Ibid.

that this is technically inaccurate. The 12th Parliament also completed its full tenure, though under the shadow of the military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, though military rule had, legally, ended.⁶⁰

The euphoria, however, was very short. Prior to the 2018 elections, attempts were made by the deep state to target particular political formations among the front-line parties, most prominently PML-N, which had been in power since 2013, using courts and the ECP. For instance, on July 14, 2018, the Lahore Police registered at least 12 FIRs [First Information Reports] against top PML-N leaders, including the then party chief Shehbaz Sharif, on charges of terrorism, attempt to murder, interference in government matters, and violation of Section 144 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which prohibits joining an unlawful assembly armed with deadly weapons. Shehbaz Sharif, the Chief Minister of Punjab Province till May 2018 is the brother of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The FIRs were lodged a day after violent clashes erupted between PML-N supporters and law enforcement agencies on Nawaz Sharif's arrival in Lahore. Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam were convicted by an Accountability Court on July 6, 2018, in absentia, while they were visiting Sharif's ailing wife in London. The sentence, 10 years in prison in Nawaz Sharif's case, came almost a year after Pakistan's Supreme Court removed him from office and less than five months after the court barred him from holding office for life. The case stemmed from the so-called Panama Papers leak that disclosed expensive and undeclared property owned by the Sharif family in London. Nawaz Sharif and Mryam were both arrested on their arrival and were lodged in Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail. The then Leader of Opposition

60 Ibid.

in the Senate, PPP Senator Sherry Rehman on July 12, 2018, also alleged that some parties were being rewarded while others being targeted, the latter including the PPP. Talking to journalists after she and Senator Maula Bakhsh Chandio met with the then Chief Election Commissioner Justice Sardar Muhammad Raza Khan, she disclosed that they apprised Raza Khan of their concerns and how their candidates were being disqualified and pressured to change loyalties. She complained that they had been talking to the ECP for over a month, but the ECP was not paying any attention to their concerns. “‘Proscribed organisations’ candidates are being brought to the forefront, while our candidates are being disqualified,” she asserted, “Our party is being stopped from running its election campaign. Magisterial powers are being given to people other than the presiding officers.” The efforts of the military to steer the elections against PML-N and PPP, the two most popular political formations in Pakistan at that time, and in favour of a possible coalition led by Imran Khan’s PTI and including a range of radical Islamist formations, enormously destabilized both the political and extremist landscape across the country.⁶¹

As expected, Pakistan’s deep state once again succeeded in getting its person of choice ‘elected’ as the Prime Minister of the country. Though the July 25, 2018, General Election results threw up a fractured mandate, PTI chief Imran Khan became the new Prime Minister. In the night of July 28, 2018, PTI leader Naemul Haq asserted that consultations were on to complete the numbers game, adding, “We have done our homework and he [Imran Khan] will take oath as Prime Minister before August 14.” Earlier, on July 28, the ECP had released the final election results according to which PTI emerged as

61 Ajit Kumar Singh, “Murdering Democracy”, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, July 16, 2028, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-17-No-3> .

the largest political party in the National Assembly, with 116 seats, followed by PML-N, with 64 seats; the PPP, 43 seats; the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), 12 seats; MQM-P, six seats; Pakistan Muslim League – Quaid (PML-Q) and BAP, four seats each; BNP, three seats; Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA), two seats; Awami National Party (ANP), Awami Muslim League (AML), Jamhoori Wattan Party (JWP), one seat each; and 13 independents.⁶²

Indeed, amid allegations of rigging and manipulations during 2024 polls, PML-N Senator Irfan Siddiqui, speaking in the Senate, the upper house of Parliament, on February 20, 2024, recalled that all the allegations levelled by the PTI today were similar to the ‘injustices’ the PML-N faced in 2018.⁶³ He added that the country’s electoral history was ‘not perfect’ and this situation had persisted for several decades. Describing the 2018 General Elections as a “dark chapter” in Pakistan’s history, he stated,

History of our elections is not exactly the best. But why are we not talking about the 2018 polls? In 2018, Nawaz Sharif was behind bars, he was not allowed to participate in the election. Was it fair back then? and there was no outcry at that time!!⁶⁴

And further,

Whatever happened in the 2018 General Elections is a dark chapter in the history of our country. A lot happened back then and maybe the same happened this

62 Ajit Kumar Singh, “Democracy and the Deep State”, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-17-No-5>.

63 “Nawaz Sharif’s party says Pakistan’s electoral history not perfect”, *The Print*, February 20, 2024, <https://theprint.in/world/nawaz-sharifs-party-says-pakistans-electoral-history-not-perfect/1972617/>.

64 Ibid.

year as well. And if the same happened again, then it took place across the country and not just in Punjab or Balochistan. It happened in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well. If you suffered from it, so did we. It isn't fair to say that no rigging took place where you won and vice versa.⁶⁵

Significantly, Nawaz Sharif, who then led the country's most powerful political family as well as the PML-N, was disqualified by the Supreme Court from holding public office in 2017 was also sentenced to 10 years in prison by an accountability court, and barred from contesting the General Elections due to his conviction.

DANGEROUS TRAJECTORY

With widespread and credible allegations of election rigging, the Establishment is facing unprecedented ignominy and a rising challenge to its authority. It is significant that the PTI-backed Independents have performed well across the country – including Punjab, the Establishment heartland and Nawaz Sharif's home Province. A crisis of legitimacy is inevitable, and will hobble any government that is formed in contravention of the popular mandate. The possibility of a situation arising where the Establishment may 'be forced' to take 'full control' of governance, citing critical disorders, is growing.

The political fragility can only be worsened by the economy, which has been in tatters for long, with little hope of imminent revival. Pakistan's budget deficit reached PKR 2.4 trillion or 2.3 percent of the GDP in the first half of fiscal year 2024, up from PKR 1.7 trillion or 2 percent of GDP in the same period last year. As on February 11, the USD to PKR

65 Ibid.

interbank exchange rate was PKR 278.5 according to Pakistan Interbank. The prices of essential commodities are soaring, with as inflation at 28.3 per cent.

Socio-political and economic turmoil have deepened further, as the Establishment's entrenched policy of using terrorism as a strategic tool boomerangs. After a peak in 2009, at 11,317, terrorism-linked fatalities, violence declined steadily, to bottom out at 365 such fatalities in 2019. A sustained rising trend has since been established, with 1,502 killed in 2023 – including 532 Security Force (SF) personnel. 278 terrorism/insurgency linked fatalities have already been recorded in 2024 (data till February 24), including 75 SF personnel. While positive, the SF:Terrorist kill ratio is not very reassuring, at 1:1.098 in 2023; and 1:1.04 in 2024, indicating severe pressure on the SFs. These trends are unlikely to improve, with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State (IS) operating across the border from Afghanistan, the former with tacit support from the Taliban.

It is useful to recall, here, that Imran Khan had often expressed sympathy with TTP, which has its strongest operational base in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Khan's home Province. In the recent past, Khan has repeatedly reminded the Establishment that a refusal to accept an electoral mandate had led to the breaking away of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and another such outcome was conceivable if the people's will was again ignored.⁶⁶ The degree to which such sentiments can coalesce with the TTP's agenda and activities, with Pakhtun identity politics, and with the Taliban's ambitions, in the restive Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region remains to be seen.

⁶⁶ Ajit Kumar Singh, "Establishment losing Authority", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-22-No-34#assessment1>.

Domestic terrorism continues to thrive in Pakistan within a broader environment that the Establishment has created to facilitate the operations of foreign oriented terrorist formations, both directed against neighbours as well as wider global formations, and sectarian (anti-Shia) terrorist groups, as well as armed proxies – hit squads – that are deployed against dissident and rebel elements, particularly in Balochistan. Significantly, the mobilizing ideology of all these groups is Islamist (Sunni) extremism, and overlaps, crossovers and operational coordination are not uncommon. Indeed, groups that receive strong state support – including, for instance, the Lashkar e Taiba (LeT) and Jaish e Mohammad (JeM) – have had long and close links with the TTP as well as with the Afghan Taliban. A change in the political environment or ground situation in Pakistan can provide a dramatic fillip to domestically oriented terrorist formations, particularly the TTP.

Crucially, the Durand Line has re-emerged as a contentious issue between Islamabad and Kabul. There have been repeated and direct confrontations between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani border forces. Moreover, despite urgent exhortations and pressure from Islamabad, the Afghan Taliban has taken little meaningful action against the TTP cadres/leaders who have been sheltering on Afghan soil. The increased volatility of the Af-Pak border has helped the TTP infiltrate most of its cadres into Pakistan, and the group has made deep inroads across Pakistan, far beyond its traditional strongholds in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Pakistan's historical malfeasance has, moreover, left it with no friends in the immediate neighbourhood, with the exception of China. The fractious history with India, and Rawalpindi's

enduring proxy war on Indian soil do not bear repetition here.⁶⁷ Friction with Iran also has a long history, and, most recently, on January 16, 2024, Iran's Revolutionary Guards launched "precision missile and drone strikes" on two alleged strongholds of the Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice, formerly Jundallah) an anti-Iran Baloch separatist formation, located in the Pakistani Balochistan, which borders the Sistan & Baluchistan Province of Iran. According to reports, two children were killed in the Iranian attack,⁶⁸ which was a response to an attack by Jaish al-Adl at a police station in the city of Rask, in the Sistan & Baluchestan, in which 11 policemen were killed on December 13, 2023.⁶⁹ The Jaish al-Adl, re-christened in 2012 from its original Jundallah after a US ban on the latter, and blacklisted by Iran as a terrorist group, claimed responsibility for the Rask attack. Pakistan retaliated to the missile and drone strikes with an air attack in the Sistan & Baluchestan Province on January 18, targeting alleged hideouts of the Balochistan Liberation Front and Balochistan Liberation Army. At least nine persons were killed in the attack.⁷⁰ Though the tension has deescalated, both sides continued to blame each other for harbouring 'terrorist groups'.

67 Ajai Sahni, "With more of the same in Pakistan, same outcome is certain", *The New Indian Express*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/voices/2024/Feb/09/with-more-of-the-same-in-pakistan-same-outcome-is-certain>.

68 "Pakistan says two children killed in 'completely unacceptable' Iran attack", *Al Jazeera*, January 17, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/17/pakistan-says-two-children-killed-in-completely-unacceptable-iran-attack>.

69 "11 Iran Police Killed in Jihadist-Claimed Attack: State TV", *The Defense Post*, December 15, 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/12/15/iran-police-killed-jihadist-attack/#:~:text=At%20least%2011%20Iranian%20police,told%20state%20television%20on%20Friday>.

70 Frances Mao, Caroline Davies and Paul Adams, "Pakistan launches retaliatory strikes into Iran, killing nine people", *BBC*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68014882>.

Another source of concern for the Establishment in Pakistan is the recent spate of targeted killings of the leaders/cadres of India-directed terrorist proxies – both Islamist and Khalistani – by unidentified assailants inside Pakistan. Between 2020 and January 2024, at least 20 such terrorists have been killed. These killings are most likely the result of increasing differences within these terrorist groups or their rivals operating from Pakistan, though there are unsubstantiated allegations regarding the involvement of ‘Indian agencies’ in some of these. Since Pakistan refuses to acknowledge the presence of most of the deceased terrorists on its soil, transparent investigations and a definitive identification of the victims and the perpetrators remains unlikely. Within the current context of a deteriorating security situation, there is a strong likelihood of a surge in such killings as well, as the Establishment’s control of its proxies weakens.

Pakistan is at a crossroads and the present electoral outcome, the consequent and likely political instability, as well as the loss of credibility and erosion of the long-held faith in the Military Establishment, are likely to combine to spawn new sources of destabilization and violence. The country has, of course, survived deep crises in the past, but it is useful to recall that it has emerged weaker from each. Crucially, the manifest loss of faith in the Military Establishment has unhinged the nation from the anchor on which it has long relied with dogged fidelity, despite the Establishment’s dubious role through Pakistan’s fractious history. Absent a political leadership which has the sagacity and vision to lead the country out of its present morass, the loss of the Establishment’s authority can only deepen the enveloping instability.

In the immediate aftermath of the election results and reports of rigging, there were country-wide protests by PTI supporters.

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An AI generated message from the imprisoned Imran Khan claimed an overwhelming victory and exhorted the people of Pakistan to demonstrate the capacity to translate their mandate into reality. The protests were met with widespread and presently successful repression, but this is likely to drive public anger underground, and to amplify the rising trend of domestic terrorism. The opportunistic alliance of the PML-N and PPP is unlikely to provide a particularly inspiring of governance, or to engineer any dramatic recovery out of the social, political and economic chaos that has blighted the country over the past years. The steady and downward trajectory of Pakistan over the decades can only sharpen under the corrosive impact of this latest farce of an election.

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