

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

**Post-Elections Analysis:
Pakistan's "New" Political Order Faces a Polycrisis**

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The lead up to Pakistan's 2024 elections was ridden with political instability. After Imran Khan's ouster as prime minister in April 2022, a caretaker government significantly delayed holding elections, allowing for the creation of an uneven playing field for Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) (Kugelman 2024). Khan's fall-out with Pakistan's all-powerful military establishment resulted in the PTI losing support of its allies and suffering rapid defections from party ranks. A series of politically motivated cases were launched against Khan (*Reuters* 2024-01-31) and he was jailed and disqualified from running for office. PTI's election symbol (the cricket bat) was taken away following another case on intraparty elections, forcing PTI candidates to compete in the elections without a party affiliation (Bhatti 2024).

Meanwhile, PTI's primary opposition, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was anticipated to be the biggest beneficiary of these crackdowns against the PTI. Nawaz Sharif, PML-N chief, had returned to Pakistan after four years in exile; cases of corruption were steadily dismissed and the life-time ban against Sharif was scrapped (*Reuters* 2024-01-08). The PML-N also allied with Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to lead an opposition against Khan in the lead up to Khan's ouster. The stage appeared to be set for the PML-N and PPP to ease their ways back into power.

But on February 8, Pakistanis demonstrated the power of the vote, surprising even the most astute political pundits. Early results showed PML-N candidates suffering and PTI-affiliated (independent) candidates in the lead. These results suggested voter fatigue against the incumbent PML-N, robust support for the PTI, and anger against the military's persisting involvement in domestic politics.

Delays in elections results and allegations of rampant voter fraud further delegitimized the process and enflamed public sentiments against PML-N. Previously confident in a smooth return to power, the Sharif clan was instead forced to turn to the PPP and Muttahida Qaumi Movement to negotiate a "marriage of convenience" in which a power-sharing arrangement now sees Shahbaz Sharif (Nawaz's younger brother) as second-time prime minister and PPP chairperson Asif Zardari as second-time president. Khan, meanwhile, remains in jail, with his supporters and PTI candidates still protesting election results.

Civil-Military Relations and the "Same Page" Model

It is impossible to understand these elections without placing them in the context of the evolution of hybrid politics in Pakistan since 2018. From 2008 to 2018, Pakistan's military accepted competitive

multi-party elections that produced coalition governments which then had to negotiate working relationships with the military in order to rule at the center. Since 2018, the military has opted for a different hybrid arrangement in which governments at the center would (i) come to power with the military's help, (ii) rely on military support against political competition, (iii) govern based on a shared civil-military understanding of the governing agenda, and (iv) accept the military's steering role in governance. In short, the elected civilian government needed to be on the "same page" with the military in order to rule (Almeida 2019).

The first of these hybrid arrangements was between the PTI and the military. Khan campaigned on an anti-corruption populist platform, and the military, aligned with a section of the Supreme Court, used propaganda, politically motivated cases against competing parties, arrests of opposition party workers, and material and coercive inducements for rival political candidates, to undermine the incumbent PML-N's electoral prospects and facilitate PTI's electoral victory (Bajpai and Kureshi 2022). Between 2018 and 2022, the Chief of Army Staff and Prime Minister Khan relied on military-controlled intelligence agencies and anti-corruption agencies to harass, arrest and detain leaders of opposition parties.

Whereas the confluence of executive aggrandizement, populist mobilization, and opposition repression that characterized the PTI's rise in 2018 resembled the pattern of democratic backsliding recently witnessed in many other countries (Bermeo 2016), the duality of a civilian and military leadership at the helm of the hybrid formation meant that its stability depended on the sustained alignment between civilian and military leadership.

By 2021, differences over foreign policy, governance, and important transfers and postings within the military, led the military to conclude that even if Khan and the military had an ideological affinity, Khan was undermining the army's institutional interests (Mir and Kureshi 2022). This "fall-out" provided an opening for the PML-N and the PPP to coalesce into an alliance, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), that mounted a successful no-confidence bid against Khan in parliament, with the military's support.

A new "same-page" hybrid arrangement was established, this time between the military and the coalition of parties brought together by the military and led by the PDM. These parties aligned with the military leadership's agenda to (i) weaken Khan, (ii) restore ties with international partners, and (iii) secure much-needed international donor funding.

But whereas PTI had lost the military leadership's support, thanks to a combination of economic hardship due to rampant inflation, the new coalition's lackluster leadership, and Khan's relentless campaigning, PTI rebounded in popularity even as it attacked the military for colluding in removing Khan from power. Following PTI protests targeting military installations and bases on May 9 of 2023, the repertoire of repression deployed against PTI resembled the one used against PML-N in 2018, but it was carried out in a more brazen and often more brutal fashion.

When the PDM government's term ended in 2023, a new caretaker government came to power, comprising handpicked officials who owed their careers to their ties to the military and were willing to secure the military's interests across all areas of government. During the tenure of the caretaker cabinet, a series of measures were taken to enhance the prosecution of anti-military dissent, secure the military's own steering role in economic policymaking and other sectors of government, and brutally crackdown on PTI (Sheikh 2023).

Hybrid Politics Continues

PTI's surprising electoral success and PML-N's poor performance taught the military two contrasting lessons. First, there were limits to the military's ability to manipulate public opinion and manage the political landscape. Even as the military remains the most trusted institution in the state, its attempts at political engineering backfired as supporters of Khan were mobilized at least in part by anger at the military's meddling (Khan 2024b).

Second, in spite of this outcry against military interference, the military was still well-positioned to establish a "same-page" regime. With the PML-N having performed particularly badly, its only path to power lay through brazen military-led manipulation of polling results and the military's brokerage of a coalition government with PML-N at the helm.

Thus, PML-N is now in power, but its hold on power is entirely dependent upon military manipulation and support, and therefore the party is willing to accede to all the strings that come attached. The PPP has reluctantly joined the coalition at the military's insistence but refused to take cabinet positions. Instead, it has assumed offices in the presidency and parliament, important offices that allow PPP to avoid taking ownership for the more unpopular decisions the next government will have to make, particularly to secure donor funding. This reveals the vulnerabilities of the new government and its dependency on the military.

The PML-N has made Shahbaz, the party leader who enjoys the closest relationship with the military, Prime Minister. It has also integrated several of the military's most favored members of the outgoing caretaker set up into the new cabinet and is willing to accept the military's steering role in multiple spheres of governance. Consequently, Pakistan once again has a government that has come to power thanks to military support in the elections and against the opposition (PTI). It is committed to a common governing agenda with the military, and is willing to integrate the military and its affiliates into governing roles.

Thus, the military has been able to sustain the "same-page" hybrid arrangements it has been experimenting with since 2018, that afford the military an enhanced steering role in governing the state without facing significant political opposition. However, it has come at the cost of growing public anger at the military's overt manipulation of the political system.

"Polycrisis" and Possibilities

A post-elections analysis, set against Pakistan's ongoing polycrisis, suggests that several challenges lie ahead for the new government, with repercussions for the health of democratic politics in Pakistan.

On the political front, first, is the question of survival. Some speculate that the current coalition government may see an in-house change of leadership, before it even completes its term (Ellis-Petersen 2024). Second, the coalition's survival also depends upon Khan's ability to maneuver backchannel negotiations with the military. Should the establishment "fall out" with the Sharifs and PTI's opposition politics sustain momentum both inside parliament and on the streets, the military may, in time, consider alternative arrangements with PTI. Even if the current coalition completes its term, and opposition from PTI is contained, the country is likely to see entrenched hybrid political arrangements. At its best, this might create a brief period of political stability. At its worst, this "stability" may require greater curbs on constitutional freedoms and human rights.

Pakistan has a thriving civil society, with steadily increasing digital and social media activism, which means that some of the greatest pushback to the military's encroachment into democratic activity comes from online platforms such as X (former Twitter), YouTube and TikTok. In the days leading up to and following the elections, Pakistani authorities restricted access to these platforms for long durations, even shutting down mobile phones and internet services. As news of voter fraud and electoral rigging spread rampantly across social media in the days after the polls, these platforms became inaccessible (X still remains inaccessible), while police officers detained more critical journalists, and cracked down on opposition protests and PTI leaders across Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and even Punjab.

Should such repression continue, Pakistan may suffer greater democratic backsliding; rather than the post-election "healing" that the incoming leaders had promised (*Dawn* 2024-02-11). Opposition forces and dissidents – both at the center, and at the peripheries – will be on the receiving end of state-perpetrated violence. In the long run, this can worsen socio-political polarization and pave the way for greater political instability.

Financial hardships and economic grievances are going to be another cause of instability ahead, with inflation soaring at 23 percent and creating a cost-of-living crisis. The country continues to remain dependent on loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which will come with harsh conditions and demands for undertaking difficult and wide-ranging structural reforms (Rana 2023). The negotiations for the next IMF loan are going to take place in the weeks to come and, till then, Pakistan may struggle to repay its debts. The current government will also look to its allies in the Middle East and China for fresh loans (Hussain 2024). Without the support from IMF and friendly states, the new leadership is unlikely to emerge out of this ongoing economic crisis, which can worsen public discontent.

Finally, the coalition's legitimacy and credibility will be tested by insecurity, resistance, and armed conflict in Pakistan's peripheries. In Balochistan, a social movement is surging against enforced disappearances. This movement is led primarily by women and families of victims of state violence which has led to widespread local and international condemnation of the state's counterinsurgency practices (Baloch 2024). Simultaneously, the province grapples with insurgent violence perpetrated by Baloch separatists, as well as internationally connected militant organizations, including the Islamic State. Similarly, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, since 2018, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement has led protests against state and militant violence while the province continues to suffer brutal violence inflicted by armed actors, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. The regional connections of these militant groups to neighboring states, including Afghanistan and Iran, indicates a difficult period for Pakistan's foreign relations ahead (Khan 2024a).

Pakistan's pathway to democracy lies not just in the government's ability to politically stabilize the center, but also in its ability to empower its peripheries, emancipate its marginalized populations, and steadily repossess the governing space ceded to the military. The ongoing protests and the current anti-establishment public sentiment provide all civilian actors, especially the mainstream political parties, a rare opportunity to rethink their "complacent reliance upon the military as kingmaker" (Khan 2024b). Whether they capitalize upon this moment in Pakistan's political history and strive for lasting peace and stability, remains to be seen. ■

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