

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Pakistan Elections 2024: 'Same Politics' and Some New Trends

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## **S***ummary*

Despite efforts by the country's powerful army to weaken the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by former Prime Minister Imran Khan, independent candidates supported by the PTI secured the highest number of seats in the national assembly. The coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif has its task cut out to deal with Pakistan's economic and security challenges.

Pakistan’s 12<sup>th</sup> national and provincial elections were held on 8 February 2024, amid a tough political, economic and security situation. Many politicians, commentators and international observers remained skeptical till the last moment about whether the elections would be held as scheduled. The date itself was set only after the intervention from the top court of the country, asking the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to come up with a date for elections to end the uncertainty surrounding it.<sup>1</sup> The assemblies had completed their terms and were dissolved in August 2023. According to the constitution of Pakistan, the elections have to be held within three months after the dissolution of the assemblies. However, delimitation of constituencies according to latest census figure took some time.

Finally, amid tough security measures in which the army and civil armed forces were deployed to provide security to the polling stations and the voters,<sup>2</sup> voting for the national and provincial assemblies was held on the same day across the country. Overall 47.6 per cent polling was recorded in the elections.<sup>3</sup> Out of a total 128,585,760 voters in Pakistan, over 48 per cent of them cast their vote. The percentage of voting was marginally less than in 2018, which stood at 52.1 per cent. Compared to the last election, however, more people cast their votes as the number of total registered voters increased from 106 million in 2018 to 128.6 million in 2024.

Almost all Pakistan observers and seasoned political pundits were proven wrong as soon as the final results started pouring in. Despite all the efforts by the country’s powerful army, known as the establishment, to weaken Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by the former Prime Minister Imran Khan, independent candidates supported by the party secured the highest number of seats in the national assembly. It also got overwhelming majority in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and came close second in the crucial province of Punjab (see Table I and Table II).

Prior to the election, it was speculated that Nawaz Sharif, and his party, the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), favoured by the establishment, might win most seats, if not the majority in the national assembly. Also, survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan one month before the elections showed that the gap between the PTI and PML-N was decreasing consistently since March 2023 as the election were inching closer.<sup>4</sup> In Punjab, while 34 per cent said they would vote for the PTI, 32 per cent were going to vote for the PML-N. At the national level as well, though Imran Khan was leading,

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<sup>1</sup> Nasir Iqbal, [“ECP Agrees to Hold Elections on Feb 8”](#), *Dawn*, 3 November 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Rizwan Shehzad, [“Govt Approves Troop Deployment for Poll Security”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 23 January 2024.

<sup>3</sup> [“FAFEN Analysis of Voter Turnout”](#), *Free and Fair Election Network*, 14 February 2024.

<sup>4</sup> [“Gallup Pakistan Political Weather Report: 1 month before the General Election 2024”](#), Gallup Pakistan, 11 January 2024.

the gap between the PTI and PML-N was getting bridged as the elections were coming closer. On the Election Day, the voters gave a different mandate, proving all speculations wrong. It is also true that the National Assembly mandate was fractured with no party getting a clear majority.

**Table I: Seats Won by Parties in 2024 and 2018 Elections**

<b>Political party</b>	<b>Seats Won in 2024</b>	<b>Seats Won in 2018</b>
Independent (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf supported)	93	115
Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)	75	64
Pakistan People’s Party (PPP)	54	43
Mutahidda Quymi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P)	17	6
Azad	8	13
Jamaat Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F)	5	12 (MMA alliance)
Pakistan Muslim League (Q)	3	4
Balochistan National Party (BNP-Mengal)	2	3
Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP)	3	
Balochistan National Party (BNP)	2	3
Balochistan Awami Party (BAP)	1	4
Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM)	1	
Pakistan Muslim League (Z)	1	
Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP)	1	
National Party	1	

**Source:** Geo TV [National Election Results 2024](#) & [Dawn News 2018](#).

## Context of 2024 Elections

The elections were held in the background of the 9 May 2023 protests, against the arrest of the former Prime Minister Imran Khan and deteriorating economic and security situation. Khan’s government was removed from power through a no-

confidence motion in April 2022, moved by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), an alliance comprising over a dozen parties. After Khan’s fall, the PDM formed the government led by Shehbaz Sharif as the Prime Minister. However, the deteriorating economic situation and security conditions in the country took the wind out of the ruling alliance’s sails.

Since his ouster, Imran has been accusing the West for conspiring to remove him from power. He also alleged that he was a victim of the political conspiracy by the PDM with the support of the establishment. The fall-out with the establishment came when Khan differed on the appointment of next Army Chief Asif Munir whom he had removed as Director General of ISI in 2017 and replaced him with an officer seen as close to him, Lt Gen Faiz Hamid.

After his removal from power, the establishment filed several cases against him for revealing state secrets in the Cipher case, Toshakhana corruption, instigating violence, among others. Violent protest erupted after Khan was arrested by Pakistan Rangers from the Islamabad High Court premises. Military installation and the house of Lahore Corp Commander was attacked and vandalised by his supporters. Though Imran condemned these violent incidents, the damage was already done. Several senior party members left PTI in the aftermath of this violence. Moreover, these attacks were a severe blow to image of the invincible powerful Army who have stitched coalitions at their will and governed through a hybrid system.

## **Roadblocks to PTI’s Comeback**

It is true that Imran Khan’s popularity was low when he was voted out of power. The economy was in shambles. His decision not to approach the IMF for funds was pinching the economy, inflation was peaking, fuel and prices of essential commodities were rising. Yet Khan was seen as anti-corruption crusader. He did not hesitate to put his political opponents behind the bars. Yet, once he was out of power, he skillfully changed the narrative of Western conspiracy against him, military interference and painted his opponents as ‘corrupt politicians’ in cahoots with the establishment. His narrative appealed to the new generation of young voters who resent Army’s interference in the politics.

Since his ouster, all efforts were made by the establishment to decimate Imran Khan, his party and weaken his support base by arrests, filing false cases, coercing his party members to change loyalty. Khan has not yielded so far and has been demanding a fair trial of the cases against him and his party members. He has also demanded a fair investigation of the 9 May incidents. While in Nawaz Sharif’s case, Pakistani court quashed corruption charges against him and freed him, in the cases against Imran Khan, judgements were rushed to convict him just before the

elections. In two weeks, he was punished in three cases and sentenced to 10, 14 and seven years in prison.<sup>5</sup> The ban on Nawaz Sharif to contest election was lifted as the court said a ban for life to contest is a violation of fundamental rights of a citizen.

Nawaz Sharif returned from self-imposed exile after almost four years. Within two months, all cases against him were cleared so that he could file nomination for the elections.<sup>6</sup> His party was allowed to run an enthusiastic election campaign, unlike the PTI whose election symbol, bat, was taken away just few weeks ahead of the elections.<sup>7</sup> Khan’s party was barred from fighting elections as a registered political party. Even its independent members were often stopped from campaigning and their rallies were raided by the police.<sup>8</sup>

The economic and security situation in Pakistan has been deteriorating due to the persistent political instability and confrontational politics. The country’s economy has been growing at a rate of 2–3 per cent,<sup>9</sup> much lower than the country needs to grow to effectively address its economic issues. Foreign investment has dwindled and foreign exchange reserve touched a little more than US\$ 4 billion sending alarm bells. There was a stampede for food in Sindh.<sup>10</sup>

Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) was established as a single window clearance and Pakistan Investment Policy (PIP) 2023 was adopted in July 2023. In 2022, Foreign Direct Investment stood at US\$ 1.5 billion. The IMF preconditions to lift subsidy to enable Pakistan to receive the IMF tranche only contributed to economic hardship. Similarly, the country is facing increasing security challenges.<sup>11</sup> The elections were held in this background, with the expectation that the new government would address these challenges.

## People’s Verdict

The electorate in Pakistan have given a fragmented mandate in the 2024 elections. No single party has won the majority in the national assembly as well as in the provincial assemblies of Punjab and Balochistan. In Sindh, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) has got a clear majority and in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the PTI

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<sup>5</sup> Umer Burney, [“In Yet Another Conviction, Imran and Bushra Bibi Handed 7-year Jail Sentences in Iddat Case”](#), *Dawn*, 3 February 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Umer Burney, [“In Major Relief, IHC Acquits Nawaz Sharif in Avenfield Reference”](#), *Dawn*, 29 November 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Maryam Nawaz, [“PTI Knocked Out of Electoral Arena as 'Bat' Symbol Withdrawn”](#), *Geo News*, 13 January 2024.

<sup>8</sup> [“Crackdown on PTI Rallies Amid Election Trail”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 28 January 2024.

<sup>9</sup> [“SBP Forecasts Real GDP Growth to Fall in 2-3pc Range in FY24”](#), *Dawn*, 23 October 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Simonne Shah, [“Why Pakistan is Facing a Growing Food Crisis”](#), *Time*, 13 January 2023.

<sup>11</sup> [“Annual Report 2023”](#), Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), 1 January 2024.

supported independent candidates have won an overwhelming number of seats. Elections for one national assembly seat was postponed due to the killing of a candidate in KP.<sup>12</sup> The result for another seat was withheld due to the reports of rigging.

Out of the 264 declared results for the national assembly seats, the PTI-backed candidates have won 93 seats, PML-N 75, PPP 54, and Mutahidda Quami Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) has won 17 seats. No party, thus, has been able to get close to the halfway mark of 134 to form the government. New parties, formed by the former PTI members like the Istahkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Party-Parliamentarian (PTI-P) performed badly. Some parties have alleged rigging and distorting of the election results as the declaration of results were inordinately delayed.

The most explosive revelation was made by Rawalpindi Commissioner Liaquat Ali Chattha who accused the government of rigging the election by making independent candidate lose the election.<sup>13</sup> This has added to the rising chorus of rigging. This is also not the first time Khan is accusing the government of rigging. He had done that in 2013 and an independent commission had rejected his accusation as baseless.

The low turnout may have helped the PTI win the highest number of seats in the national assembly. One factor may be that young voters who remain both tech-savvy and active on social media helped the PTI as the party remains popular among the young. The PTI, left with no option but to explore new ways to mobilise its voters due to the restriction imposed on its activities, used ‘guerilla campaign’, entailing the use of social media to hold meetings, rallies and convey the party’s messages to the voters.<sup>14</sup> This could have helped to woo young voters particularly who see Khan’s conviction as politically motivated and his ouster in April 2022 as a bigger conspiracy. Khan who was a popular cricketer is also seen as an uncorrupt politician who had sold the dream of ‘Naya Pakistan’ which was cut short by the establishment.

Since the 2018 elections, 10.42 million new voters were added to the total number of voters in the country. More importantly, 56.86 million are young voters<sup>15</sup>, aged between the age of 18 and 35. Though there is no survey to show how many and how these young voters voted, given the PTI’s outreach on social media, its young supporters may have come out to vote for the party-backed candidates.

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<sup>12</sup> Ali Akbar and Abdullah Zehri, “[Independent Candidate Shot Dead While Canvassing in Bajaur: Police](#)”, *Dawn*, 31 January 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Amir Yasin, “[Official Shunted After Rigging Bombshell](#)”, *Dawn*, 18 February 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Abid Hussain, “[‘Guerilla Campaign’: How Imran Khan is Fighting Pakistan Election from Jail](#)”, *Al-Jazeera*, 7 February 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Iftikhar A. Khan, “[Number of Young Voters’ Surges to 56.86 million](#)”, *Dawn*, 16 January 2024.

According to *Dawn*, in 2018, total 46.89 per cent female voter turned out to vote. In 2024, female voters share decreased to 41.3 per cent. The report further notes that

“Men’s turnout increased from 56.01pc to 58.7pc. Approximately 2 million ballot papers were excluded from the count across all 264 National Assembly (NA) seats contested which surpasses victory margin.”<sup>16</sup>

**Table II: Seats Won by Parties in Provincial Assemblies**

Provinces	PTI-backed candidates	PML-N	PPP	Others
Punjab	116	138	10	32
Sindh	11	0	83	35
KP	80	5	4	12
Balochistan	0	9	11	30

**Source:** Geo TV [Election Results 2024](#)

## Challenges Ahead

Pakistan faces the same challenges that it has been facing, particularly for the past over two years. These include political (in) stability, economic crisis, and emerging security threats from terror groups in the country. Elections 2024 have not settled the political confrontation among the political rivals in the country. If anything, the election results have intensified it. While the PTI and PML-N both claimed victory in the elections, parties like Jamaat Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) along with the PTI have claimed that the elections were rigged. This has re-energised the claims questioning the credibility of the elections. There are slogans like ‘mandate thieves’ and demand for return of ‘85 seats’ that were snatched away from the PTI.<sup>17</sup>

The fractured mandate means that the political parties need to cobble together a coalition government in the spirit of give and take. The PTI, PML-N and PPP fought the elections less on issues related to common people, and campaigned against each other. The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) that formed the government under Shehbaz Sharif was dismantled prior to the election given the divergent views among the partners. In many constituencies, these political parties fought closely. These

<sup>16</sup> Wara Irfan, Aniqat Khan and Hawwa Fazal, “[Pakistan’s Elections in Numbers — Low Turnout, Gender Inequality and Voting Mishaps](#)”, *Dawn*, 19 February 2024.

<sup>17</sup> “[PTI Decries ‘Historic Electoral Heist’](#)”, *The Express Tribune*, 16 February 2024.

differences were proven when the PPP initially decided to offer support to the PTI than PML-N. The PTI however refused to partner either with the PML-N, PPP or even MQM-P. Given the current circumstances, the fractured mandate has pushed the PML-N, PPP and MQM-P along with other smaller parties together to get engaged in intense discussion. The parties have to come together as 29 February will be the first day for the National Assembly to convene.

Once the coalition government is formed, it essentially will be weak for a few reasons. First, instead of Nawaz Sharif, who was expected to be the next Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif has been appointed as the leader of the new alliance. Given the performance of Shehbaz Sharif during the stint of 16 months as prime minister from April 2022 to August 2023, he may not have much to offer to address the economic crisis as the IMF’s tough conditionalities would be difficult to ignore. Additionally, he may remain hostage to the alliance partners and may not be able to take strong decisions.

The country is facing a serious economic crisis. There has been no sign of it recovering, despite all the bailouts from the IMF and aid from other countries.<sup>18</sup> The imports are increasing and exports are decreasing. The Pakistan economy has contracted for the first time.<sup>19</sup> Each party has made big promises and claims, like creating millions of jobs, controlling inflation, or rolling out welfare schemes.<sup>20</sup> Managing the economy is going to be a tough challenge amidst the increasing pressure from the IMF to curb government expenditures, expand tax net and remove subsidies. The debt burden has also increased and debt servicing would paralyse the economy.

Yet another challenge for the new government will be dealing with the emerging security challenges. In the last couple of years, not only have the terror attacks increased manifold, but Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan have deteriorated. One of reasons given by some observers about the possibility of the postponement of the elections was the increasing security concerns in Balochistan and KP particularly. Overall, terror attacks have increased by 70 per cent in 2023.<sup>21</sup> The low voter turnout in these two provinces (39.5 per cent in KP and 42.9 per cent in Balochistan), was due to the security threats. The elections for the one national assembly seat in KP were cancelled due to the killing of one of the candidates.

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<sup>18</sup> Editorial, “[Moody’s Report](#)”, *Business Recorder*, 13 November 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Atif Mian, “[Pakistan’s economy has consistently fallen behind globally](#)”, X (formerly Twitter), 12 February 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Sajid Amin and Arooj Waheed, “[The Manifesto Monitor](#)”, *Business Recorder*, 7 February 2024.

<sup>21</sup> “[Annual Report 2023](#)”, Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), 1 January 2024.

## Implications

The fractured mandate will make the government unstable and would be easy for the establishment to manipulate as one had witnessed during the previous regimes in Pakistan. The government has to work closely with the military for its own political survival. The PML-N and PPP had once agreed to a charter of democracy with an agreement to keep the Army out of politics. Though this understanding was violated by Benazir Bhutto when she had a deal with General Musharraf, the two parties cannot be expected to revive this understanding. It is likely that the PTI and now JUI-F, who has rejected the election results,<sup>22</sup> will try to create hurdles in the functioning of the government. Shehbaz Sharif will be busy keeping the alliance together, impacting the tough decision-making that the country needs on the economic and security front.

Many within Pakistan and outside countries expected a politically stable Pakistan as that would make it easy to deal with numerous challenges it faces. However, the fragmented mandate has created political uncertainty. Many predict that the new government may not complete the term. The weak government may not be able to come up with a united policy to deal with the threat of terrorism. Internal priorities of the new government will impact its foreign policy decision-making, whether with the United States, China, Afghanistan and India. In the worst of the cases, the country may return to severe political instability if the new government will not be able to not hold its allies together.

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<sup>22</sup> [“Fazl Rejects ‘Rigged’ Election Results”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 14 February 2024.

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