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Reports

Pakistani Election: The Khan Factor versus Reform Challenges

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Khan's swearing in ceremony [Getty]

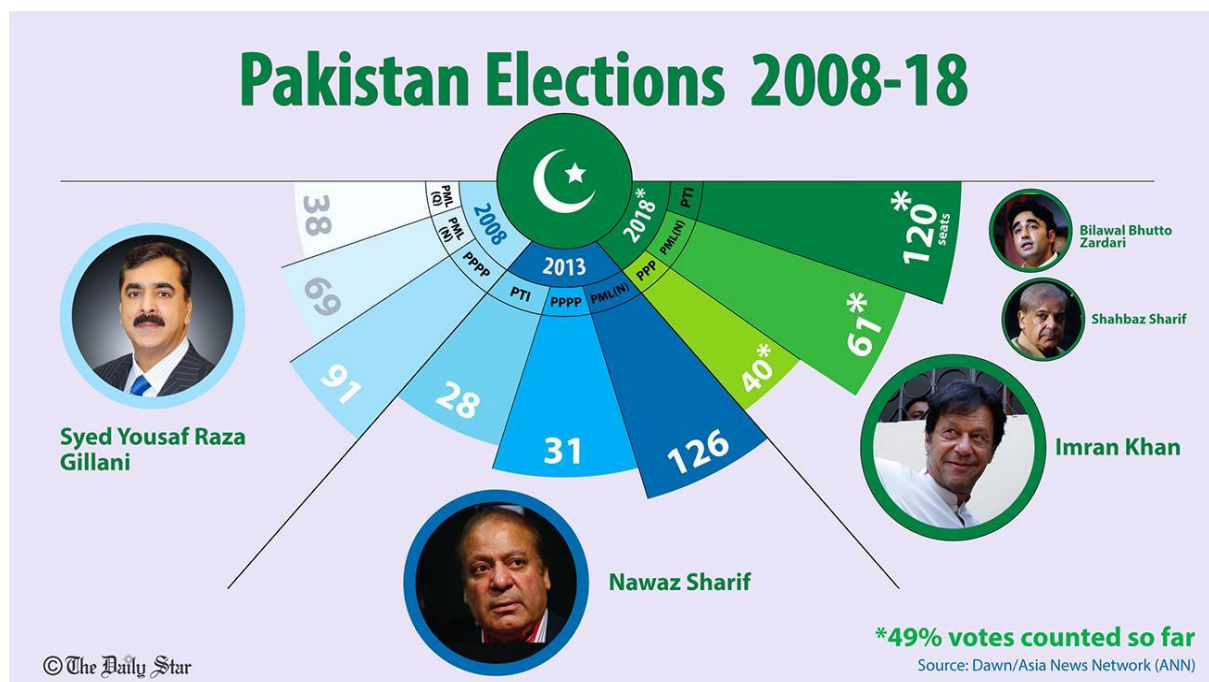
The Pakistani election held July 25, 2018, the eleventh of its kind in the post-independence era, has been transformative in many respects. It has showcased a third peaceful transfer of power from one party-led government to another. It was also the fourth consecutive nationwide polling to elect members of the national assembly, the parliament, and the four provincial assemblies since 2002. The 2008 elections marked the beginning of the third transition to democracy; the earlier two were in 1972, and 1988, after the end of two military regimes. Leader of Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party Imran Khan has declared victory in this year's general elections. By mid-August, newly-elected members of Pakistan's National Assembly took oath in the inaugural session of the National Assembly in a historical development in the democratic process. During the session, Incoming Prime minister Imran Khan and other prominent political leaders, including PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif and PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari have sworn in. However, Pakistan's new political era raises new questions. The underlying proposition of this paper is that democratic transitions are never a clear and clean disconnect with the authoritarian past, as stubborn legacies, institutional imbalances and older influences take time to fade off.

In After 1972-77 assembly, it was for the first time that a Pakistani parliament had completed its tenure in 2008. It was the first peaceful transfer of power. Although the military dictator,

Pervez Musharraf, was still a president with powers to dissolve the parliament under article 58-2b of the Constitution(1), he became weak to the point that he could not resist participation of the two major parties, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). (2) The General's arrogance, row with the judiciary in 2007, and popular movement for the independence of judiciary and restoration of democracy forced him to reconcile with the PPP under a controversial National Reconciliation Ordinance. (3)

Besides squashing corruption cases against Benazir Bhutto and her husband Asif Ali Zardari, the Ordinance allowed her to take part in the 2008 elections in return for support to Musharraf to remain president and get re-elected. This shift opened space for the return of the then-exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who came back close to the 2008 elections. During the election campaign, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on December 27, 2008. A wave of protests and sympathy and control over the PPP brought Asif Ali Zardari into the driving seat of political power.

A second similar transfer of power happened with the 2013 elections. A third it about to happened next week, with PTI, a third party forming the government at the center, the Punjab and in the KP. Theorists of democratic transition form military to elected regimes argue that if it happens twice, the chances of reversal of democracy back to military authoritarianism greatly decrease. (4)



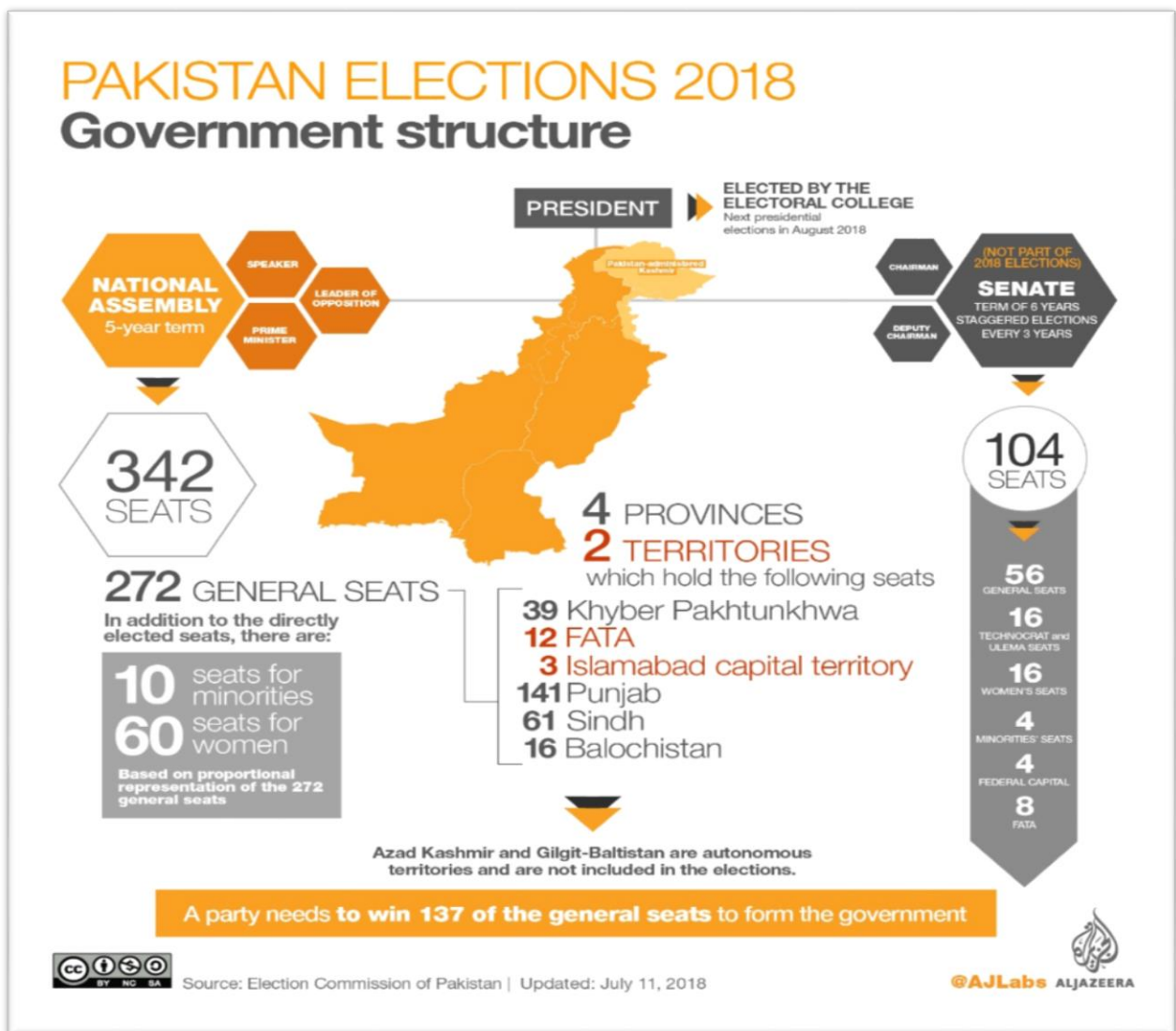
Pakistan elections 2008-18 [Asia News Network]

In Pakistan, democratic transition has taken place under the dense and heavy shadow of long military regimes—four regimes, three of which together lasted for three decades. (5) In many

ways, the country's democratic transitions have yet remained incomplete, patchy and troublesome. (6) Those who are skeptical of democratic purity have reasons and arguments that one finds difficult to be dismissed easily. Three arguments are enough to make this point:

- The military has retained control over critical foreign relations, security policy and 'war on terror'.
- There has been invisible and indirect interference in democratic politics, including manipulation of institutions against the political leaders. (7)
- The civilian regimes of the past have invariably claimed that they were not able to establish their constitutional supremacy, and had to accommodate greater influence of the military in their domain of foreign and security policy. (8)

Pakistani democracy, being transitional in nature, has shades of both—authoritarianism and democracy, as well of competing influences of the civilian leaders and the military as a dominant pole of power. The third transfer of power through an open, largely free and fair electoral process would further improve the quality of democracy, correct institutional balances and deepen the democratic spirit. It is not a cliché but a historical fact; democracies develop and refine themselves with practice. The social and political environment of Pakistan today is more supportive of democracy than ever before. Much however, will depend on whether the new party, the PTI and its leader, Imran Khan, will deliver on their promises in the next five years in the face of numerous national challenges and as well as high expectations.



Government structure [Al Jazeera]

Critical Ballot

The 2018 general elections have been critical, which by definition often bring in new parties into power, reflect new alignment of social forces, spring up new leaders and witness the demise of the older parties.⁽⁹⁾ As mentioned earlier, the elections have brought into power the PTI, which is assuming power at the center for the first time. Since independence, it is the second party, after the PPP, that has emerged as a national party. It has broken seemingly, the two-party system that had dominated the electoral politics since the second democratic transition that occurred with the death of General Ziaul Haq in 1988. The two former national parties, the PPP and the PMLN resemble the characteristics of the regional parties in the light of 2018 elections results.

The recent election results reflect the emergence of new social forces and highlight their alignment with the PTI. The most critical element in the rise of this party is the power and

influence of the new social forces, coalescing as its solid political constituency. First and foremost, it is the youth that comprises the biggest band of voting population, about 64 percent. It has remained the most active, robust, and visible voter for the PTI. Second, the poor sections of the society that once formed the voting block of the PPP have found the program, vision of change and leadership of the PTI more attractive. Third, the new middle classes of Pakistan - both rural and urban - have gradually lost faith in the old parties. In a nutshell, the success of the PTI can be interpreted as an outcome of the rise of new social forces and their realignment with this emerging political power in the country.

The 2018 election has also shown the decline of the religious parties that have been very influential in the power politics of the country. (10) The five religious parties of different sects revived the Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) to pool up their vote bank, but have secured 11 national assembly seats. The top leaders of their component parties, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam and the Jamaat-e-Islami, have lost. More significant is the fact that their popular voter percentage has declined from eleven percent in 2002 to less than nine percent in the 2018 ballot. This shift includes the new Bareilvi, sectarian and often violent Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) as well. The support base of the religious parties seems to be fragmented, and appears to be in pockets in the Pashtun parts of the KP, Balochistan, urban Punjab and Sindh and among the poor and conservative sections of the population.

The ethnic and nationalist parties have continuously fared badly in the electoral politics. They have been routed in the recent election. The Awami National Party and the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party that speak for the rights of the Pashtuns in Balochistan and KP have been wiped out. The Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) has lost out to the PTI in Karachi, barely able to get six candidates to the national assembly elected. The Sindhi nationalist factions that were part of the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) in Sindh have also figure very poorly. The case of Baloch nationalist parties is no different. A new party called Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) has captured greater number of seats than the traditional Baloch nationalist factions.

The electoral trend signifies national politics, salience of national issues and shifting followership from religious and ethnic parties to the national parties namely the PTI. It is yet a trend, not a mature pattern of politics. Pakistan's first single-member constituency electoral system is bound to create a two-party system. It encourages smaller parties to form electoral

alliances or merge into bigger parties. Certain political parties may not vanish; but will have to be part of post-election coalitions to survive.



Khan's Assets [ARY News]

A Split Mandate

The 2018 general elections have resulted into a split mandate. Although the PTI has emerged as the single largest party with 115 seats in the National Assembly, it lacks a majority in the directly-elected house of 272 members. The National Assembly, the lower house of the Parliament that elects the Prime Minister has a total of 342, which besides directly elected members includes 60 seats reserved for women and 10 allocated to minorities. The provincial assemblies are the Electoral College for the reserved seats, which are assigned to each party in proportion to their strength in each assembly. The PMLN has secured 64, and the PPP won only 43, trailing in third position. The complex mix of regional, ethnic and religious parties have bagged rest of the seats in the National Assembly. This situation has forced the PTI to

seek the support of independents to form government in the Punjab and alliances with the smaller ethnic parties from Sindh and Balochistan.

The PTI is going to form three governments: in the KP where it has made history by winning elections with two-third majority for the second time; in the Punjab—the most populous and developed province; and at the center. As the PTI has the second largest number of seats in the provincial assembly of Sindh, it is going to be the main opposition party.

Consequently, the mandate of the PTI is much larger and wider than that of any other party. However, it is not going to be smooth sailing to govern and implements the declared reforms. PTI will be facing a strong and united opposition of the two major parties and a clamorous coalition of religious parties. The PMLN, PPP and the MMA along with ethnic parties have termed the elections as rigged in favor of the PTI and have vowed to launch a protest movement inside and outside the Parliament. (11) One can argue that the opposition inside the Parliament has never been so strong and unified, as it seems to be after this year's elections. One of the potential scenarios is political rhetoric, ugly scenes, deadlocks and fight-the-fight kind of politics inside and outside the Parliament in the coming months and years. PTI will be challenged in its pursuit of implementing its agenda since it lacks majority in the Senate, the upper house of the Parliament, where the combined opposition has a clear majority and can obstruct any law passed by the lower house.

PAKISTAN ELECTIONS 2018

Voting at a glance

105,955,407

REGISTERED VOTERS

46,731,145 FEMALE 59,224,262 MALE

3,765

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CANDIDATES

110

REGISTERED POLITICAL PARTIES

30

ACTIVE POLITICAL PARTIES

18

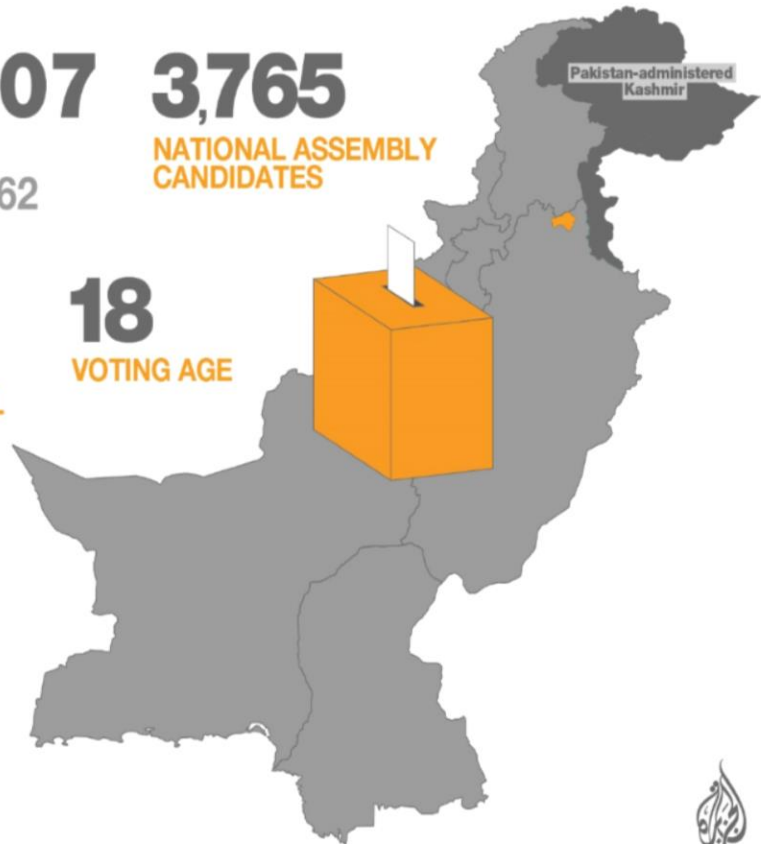
VOTING AGE

85,000

POLLING STATIONS

55%

TURNOUT IN 2013 ELECTIONS



Source: Election Commission of Pakistan | Updated: July 15, 2018



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Voting as a Glance [Al Jazeera]

Regional and Foreign Policy Outlook

Most of Pakistan's national challenges are regional; one of the reformist argument is that the country can neither make progress nor achieve stability or peace without changing its regional policies, particularly toward Afghanistan and India. From this perspective, Pakistan is stuck in history: it will have to pull itself up and look beyond partition hangover of 1947. It has the lowest regional trade; only six percent of its trade is within the region; it has an uneasy relationship with Afghanistan and India, while it attempts treading a fine line between Iran and Saudi Arabia that are interlocked in bitter rivalry in the Middle East.

China is the only country in the neighborhood with which relations have kept flourishing from over recent decades. Considering the bilateral collaboration in defense and security, the relationship has taken a new turn with the sixty-four-billion dollar Chinese investment in energy, water, infrastructure, industrial and communication projects. (12) The China-

Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a favorable post-cold war pivot in Pakistan's foreign policy. This shift emerged as a deterministic force of the geo-political realism that has reinforced the geo-security-strategic paradigm. Another contributing factor is the uneasy relationship with the United States, and persistent differences over how to stabilize Afghanistan and defeat terrorism in the region.

As the new PTI government assumes office, public debate inside and outside Pakistan has intensified about the possible future directions in the country's foreign policy. In his victory speech, Imran Khan talked about the importance of relations with the regional and global powers including Afghanistan, China, India, and the United States. He was more specific about Afghanistan as he expressed some desire to "have open borders with Afghanistan, the same way we see among the countries of European Union". (13)

Asad Umar, a candidate for the finance portfolio, has linked 'potential prosperity' of Pakistan to the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan. (14) Peace in Afghanistan can be a common point of interest with the United States. It will not be an exaggeration to say that route to establishing 'mutually beneficial' and 'balanced' relationship with the U.S. goes through Kabul. Not that Kabul holds the keys, but a peaceful settlement that would end the long, catastrophic war in Afghanistan would help remove mutual suspicions and distrust between Pakistan and the United States. (15)

As some analysts have argued, any improvement of Pakistan's relations with the United States would be critical to the stability, international connectivity, and access to the international monetary institutions, the baggage of the past distrust, and often, conflicting interests in the region may make the task quite a difficult one. (16) Equally important is the nature of Pakistan's relations with India with whom it has difficult relations. There is not much hope that difficult issues, like the Kashmir conflict, are likely to be even on the agenda of talks any time soon. However, the new government provides a fresh opportunity to initiate talks on normalizing relations, expanding trade and regional connectivity started. It is not clear yet, how Imran Khan will succeed in breaking any ground with India whereas past civilian governments have failed. Some observers may raise high hopes that Khan's leadership and popular support may lead to bold initiatives. He would need to build consensus among all the stakeholders, including the opposition, and have the powerful military on his side. Khan has indicated openness towards India as he stated "Pakistan will take two steps forward, if India

takes one".⁽¹⁷⁾ The question is when and under what conditions the two rivals will start moving forward to end a climate of 'nor war, no peace'.

The Way Ahead

One can suggest four conclusions: First, the challenges that Pakistan faces today are too many, very complex, and have lingered for a long time. They are economic, structural—in the lopsided civil-military relations—social, and political. The PTI government lacks the necessary strength in the Parliament, and faces strong opposition that has a tradition of obstructing reforms, populist streak, and nihilism.

Second, the road to reforms is rough since consensus building at times of political fragmentation and confrontational politics with loud noises of 'rigged' and alleged 'engineered' elections is going to be a herculean job. However, Khan has taken the challenge, and there is optimism that he would not make any compromise on his vision of 'change'. What may help is supportive public sentiment and favorable disposition of two vital institutions, the Supreme Court and the security establishment.

Third, PTI's declared reform agenda, if implemented, may pull Pakistan out of multiple crises. What can solidify confidence and nurture optimism is PTI's struggle and political mobilization that have echoed popular sentiments for institutional reforms, end of corruption, fair accountability, and rule of law. In its previous tenure in KP, the party has demonstrated that it can reform the most difficult region marred by terrorism and corruption.

Fourth, Pakistan's domestic reform agenda cannot move forward without a critical reappraisal of its relations with neighboring countries and the United States. Facing an economic meltdown and relative isolation, the country needs regional and American support to succeed in reforming, stabilizing, and regaining momentum for progress.

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