

Unpacking Pakistan's 2024 General Elections and the Aftermath

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Summary

More than a month after the general elections in Pakistan, the results have left more questions than answers. The allegations of rigging and 'mandate stealing', election-day violence and the delay in receiving the official poll results have called into question the reliability of the February 2024 elections and their outcome. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the Pakistan Muslim League-N led coalition are set to begin their new term at the outset of political and economic instability. Pakistan's economic challenges, including its heavy reliance on International Monetary Fund and its declining democratic values spotlight grave concerns over the country's future.

Following months of anticipation, Pakistan's general elections were held on 8 February 2024, with widespread accusations of rigging and corruption, prompting opposition parties and observers within and beyond Pakistan to question the legitimacy of the official results. The unfolding of the electoral process dealt a significant blow to Pakistan's democratic journey, casting doubt on its commitment to upholding credible and legitimate democratic governance.

The build-up to the polls was overshadowed by controversies around former prime minister, Imran Khan, and his party, the Pakistani Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Khan's imprisonment and the continued harassment of his party members deeply troubled many voters. Moreover, the PTI encountered significant obstacles as numerous nomination papers for its candidates mysteriously disappeared or were rejected. The PTI-backed candidates further encountered physical obstructions during the nomination submission process.¹ Additionally, the Election Commission of Pakistan opted to ban the use of the cricket bat, the party's iconic symbol, forcing a majority of PTI's candidates to run as independents during the elections.²

The elections also marked the triumphant return of Nawaz Sharif, who had been residing in exile in the United Kingdom since 2018.³ After years of leading the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) remotely, Nawaz has made a powerful comeback, controversially seeing his court

¹ Ali Waqar and Imran Gabol, "Rejections aplenty for PTI as scrutiny phase of nomination papers for elections ends", *Dawn*, 30 December 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1801892>.

² "PTI candidates opt for independent symbols, withdraw PTI-N tickets", *Samaa*, 13 January 2024, <https://www.samaa.tv/208737989-pti-candidates-opt-for-independent-symbols-withdraw-pti-n-tickets>.

³ "Pakistan's ex-PM Nawaz Sharif back from self-exile ahead of elections", *Al Jazeera*, 21 October 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/21/pakistans-ex-pm-nawaz-sharif-back-from-exile-ahead-of-elections#:~:text=Nawaz%20Sharif%2C%20Pakistan's%20thrice%20delected,rival%2C%20former%20premier%20Imran%20Khan>.

cases dismissed.⁴ Finally, in contemporary Pakistani politics, there is a prevalent understanding that the army, often termed the 'establishment', operates as the kingmaker in the country.⁵ Initially backing Khan, the army allegedly orchestrated his ouster following his critical remarks against the leadership of the institution.

Election Day

The polls were marred by significant controversy, with widespread allegations of rigging favouring Nawaz and his allies. International observers, such as the United States (US), were critical of the conduct of the elections.⁶ By the late hours of election day, surprising both the establishment and their adversaries, the PTI-backed candidates were notably ahead of their main rivals, the PML-N and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).⁷ PTI's supporters claimed they had enough seats for an outright majority government; yet many media outlets estimated their seat count to be around 100, falling short of the number required for a majority.⁸

However, the initial spark of hope for Khan and his supporters quickly faded as the opposition experienced a sudden resurgence in votes. This shift raised concerns of political manipulation, with results seemingly changing overnight in areas.⁹ Candidates, particularly PTI-backed independents, alleged tampering with voting figures to ensure their defeat. These claims found support from international observers, commentators, and Pakistani political figures like Maulana Fazlur Rehman, president of the Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (F). The leaders of the PTI, including Barrister Gohar Ali Khan, criticised the electoral process for lacking transparency and accountability.¹⁰

Post-Election Government Formation

Following the polls, widespread turmoil ensued, accompanied by rumours regarding power-sharing arrangements and government formation. Gohar Ali Khan and the PTI-backed independents asserted they had enough seats for a majority, a claim disputed by the PPP

⁴ Rick Noack and Shaiq Hussain, "Ousted three times before, Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif may get another shot", *The Washington Post*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/07/pakistan-election-nawaz-sharif/>.

⁵ Sarah Khan, "In Pakistan, the Military Is Still Running the Show", *Foreign Affairs*, 5 March 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/pakistan/pakistan-military-still-running-show>.

⁶ Kanishka Singh, "US, UK and EU urge probe into Pakistan election, express concerns", *Reuters*, 10 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-uk-eu-urge-probe-into-pakistan-election-express-concerns-2024-02-09/>.

⁷ "PTI-linked independents take Pakistan election lead as counting nears end", *Al Jazeera*, 9 February 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/9/pti-linked-independents-take-pakistan-election-lead-as-counting-nears-end>.

⁸ Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan election results show unexpectedly tight race", *Nikkei Asia*, 9 February 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Pakistan-elections/Pakistan-election-results-show-unexpectedly-tight-race>.

⁹ Abid Hussain, "'Mandate thieves': New Pakistan government takes shape amid slew of jabs", *Al Jazeera*, 14 February 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/14/mandate-thieves-new-pakistan-government-takes-shape-amid-slew-of-jabs>.

¹⁰ "Fazlur Rehman rejects 'rigged' poll results, invites PML-N to join JUI-F on opposition benches", *Dawn*, 14 February 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1814197>.

and PML-N, who themselves alleged rigging and corruption.¹¹ Tensions escalated when the Election Commissioner of Rawalpindi, Liaqat Ali Chatha, claimed his involvement in election result manipulation, implicating the Supreme Court and Chief Election Commissioner. The PTI initially supported his claim, but Chatha later retracted, alleging coercion by a PTI member, fueling confusion among the public.¹²

Amidst a haze of political manoeuvring, it slowly became evident that the coalition that would form the new government would be spearheaded by PML-N. Asif Ali Zardari, leader of the PPP, also called for unity among parties for Pakistan's prosperity and extended a public invitation to the PTI for talks.¹³ In the late hours of 13 February 2024, a breakthrough occurred as several prominent parties announced their intention to form a coalition government.¹⁴ Nawaz's PML-N emerged as the election winner, poised to lead a coalition that included the PPP, Muttahida Quami Movement, Pakistan Muslim League Quaid e Azam Group, Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party and the Baluchistan Awami Party.¹⁵

Despite their grievances, the PTI was resigned to sitting on the opposition benches and it pledged to vigorously protest the election results in the near future.¹⁶ Moreover, to have representation in parliament, the PTI members formed a coalition with the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), enabling them to qualify for the 60 reserved seats for women and religious minorities and making a last-ditch effort to form a government.¹⁷ However, their efforts were unsuccessful, as the Supreme Court ruled the SIC had violated the requirements for the mandatory submission of the party list for reserved seats, thus making them ineligible to receive any seats from the quota.¹⁸

The future harmony of the coalition government depends on the ongoing consensus between the PML-N and PPP. Initial reports of a power-sharing formula, with the Prime Minister's office alternating between the parties, were rejected by the PPP but a consensus on the new government's details was reached late on 20 February 2024.¹⁹ The president of

¹¹ "Barrister Gohar demands ECP CEC's resignation amid political imbroglio", *Samaa*, 20 February 2024, <https://www.samaa.tv/2087310065-barrister-gohar-demands-ecp-cec-s-resignation-amid-political-imbroglio>.

¹² Waqar Satti, "Ex-Pindi commissioner says rigging allegations drama planned by 'senior PTI leadership'", *The News International*, 22 February 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1160373-former-pindi-commissioner-chatta-retracts-bombshell-election-rigging-allegations>.

¹³ "Zardari pushes for 'all in' political reconciliation with PTI on board", *The News International*, 14 February 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1157317-zardari-pushes-for-all-in-political-reconciliation-with-pti-on-board>.

¹⁴ Sophia Saifi, "Coalition government deal in Pakistan leaves Imran Khan's party out of power", *CNN*, 13 February 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/13/asia/pakistan-coalition-government-intl/index.html>.

¹⁵ Usman Javid, "PML-N, IPP, PPP, MQM and PML-Q join forces for coalition govt", *Samaa*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.samaa.tv/208739701-pml-n-ipp-ppp-mqm-and-pml-q-join-forces-for-coalition-govt>.

¹⁶ Syed Irfan Raza and Kalbe Ali, "Resolving to sit in opposition, PTI announces protest plan", *Dawn*, 17 February 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1814810>.

¹⁷ "PTI-backed independents to join Sunni Ittehad Council: Barrister Gohar", *Dawn*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1815498>.

¹⁸ Iftikhar A Khan, "PTI to knock SC door after losing reserved seats", *Dawn*, 5 March 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1819260>.

¹⁹ "Pakistan's largest parties strike deal on coalition government", *Reuters*, 21 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-largest-parties-strike-deal-coalition-government-says-ex-foreign-2024-02-20/>.

PML-N, Shehbaz Sharif, confirmed meeting the required seat numbers with the PPP's support to form the next government. On 4 March 2024, amidst weeks of rumours, allegations, protests and confusion, Shehbaz took oath as the prime minister of Pakistan, with his cabinet sworn in on 11 March 2024, which included notable figures like Khawaja Asif and Ishaq Dar.²⁰ Zardari was elected Pakistan's president for the second time.²¹ On the provincial front, Ali Amin Gandapur of the PTI became Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,²² Sarfaraz Bugti of the PPP in Balochistan²³ and Murad Ali Shah of the PPP in Sindh.²⁴ In Punjab, Maryam Nawaz, daughter of Nawaz, made history as the first female chief minister.²⁵ The PTI formed only one provincial government, and in the national assembly, Khan's prime ministerial candidate, Omar Ayub Khan, was named the leader of the opposition.²⁶

Looking Ahead

Since Nawaz's ouster in 2018, political instability and changes in the government have been significant factors responsible for delaying the acquisition of funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Most recently, the IMF released a statement calling for the resolution of the electoral issues and pledging support for a new economic programme for Pakistan. A spokesperson for the IMF indicated a willingness to engage with the new government on several economic programs.²⁷ A follow-up statement made by the IMF explained that "a staff-level agreement with the Pakistani authorities" had been reached "on the second and final review of Pakistan's stabilisation programme".²⁸ It is estimated around US\$ 1.1 billion (S\$1.49 billion) of the US\$3 billion (S\$4.05 billion) bailout package will be released before the 11 April 2024 deadline, pending approval from the IMF's executive board.²⁹

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- ²⁰ "Pakistan's Shahbaz Sharif takes oath as prime minister, directs team to talk with IMF", *Reuters*, 5 March 2024, [https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-shehbaz-sharif-takes-oath-prime-minister-2024-0304/#:~:text=ISLAMABAD%2C%20March%20%20\(Reuters\),formation%20of%20a%20coalition%20govern](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-shehbaz-sharif-takes-oath-prime-minister-2024-0304/#:~:text=ISLAMABAD%2C%20March%20%20(Reuters),formation%20of%20a%20coalition%20govern)ment; and "Pakistan swears in newly elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's 19-member Cabinet", *AP News*, 12 March 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-new-government-cabinet-sworn-44eef2840d8636361a2a05167cd83579>.
- ²¹ "Asif Ali Zardari elected Pakistan's president for second time", *Al Jazeera*, 9 March 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/9/asif-ali-zardari-elected-pakistans-president-for-second-time>.
- ²² Arif Hayat, "PTI's Ali Amin Gandapur elected KP chief minister, demands justice for Imran and party", *Dawn*, 1 March 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1818313>.
- ²³ Saleem Shahid, "Sarfaraz Bugti becomes Balochistan CM 'unopposed'", *Dawn*, 1 March 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1818313>.
- ²⁴ Tahir Siddiqui, "PPP's Murad Ali Shah elected Sindh chief minister for third time in a row", *Dawn*, 26 February 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1817289>.
- ²⁵ Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif passes torch as daughter Maryam elected Punjab chief", *Nikkei Asia*, 26 February 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Pakistan-elections/Pakistan-s-Nawaz-Sharif-passes-torch-as-daughter-Maryam-elected-Punjab-chief>.
- ²⁶ "PTI-SIC names Omar Ayub as NA leader of opposition", *Dawn*, 10 March 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1820419>.
- ²⁷ "IMF backs new Pakistan program, urges electoral row resolution", *Arab News Pakistan*, 8 March 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2473401/pakistan>.
- ²⁸ Abid Hussain, "Pakistan, IMF reach staff-level deal to release \$1.1bn from bailout package", *Al Jazeera*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/20/pakistan-imf-reach-staff-level-deal-to-release-1-1bn-from-bailout-package>.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*

Muhammad Aurangzeb, appointed Pakistan's finance minister, faces the daunting challenge of revitalising Pakistan's economy.³⁰ The economy grapples with various issues, notably sluggish labour productivity growth, averaging only 1.33 per cent between 1990 and 2018, compared to significantly higher rates in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, India and China.³¹ Over the past three decades, labour productivity in Pakistan has either stagnated or declined in six out of 12 sectors, including mining, transport, real estate and trade.³² Pakistan's heavy reliance on foreign investment and lenders exacerbates its woes, with external debts surpassing US\$130 billion (S\$175.5 billion), nearly one-third of its gross domestic product.³³ Multilateral and bilateral debt accounts for over 80 per cent of the total external debt, while foreign currency reserves stand at a meagre US\$7.8 billion (S\$10.53 billion), equivalent to just two months of supplies.³⁴ Inflation soared to almost 40 per cent in 2023 and the Pakistani rupee depreciated by over 50 per cent in the last two years, posing a monumental challenge for the current government and economic policymakers.³⁵

Another urgent concern for Pakistan is the increasingly vocal public dissatisfaction with the country's current state of political affairs. Since Khan's ouster in 2022, the population has expressed discontent towards the figures they hold responsible for the nation's situation. The army has faced significant criticism from the masses, with the recent elections demonstrating strong support for Khan and the PTI among the voters. Unofficially, Pakistan operates as a deep state, where the security establishment appears to hold greater influence than the civilian leadership. The 8 May 2022 riots marked the staunchest protests against the army in recent times.³⁶ Additionally, figures closely aligned with the establishment, such as the Sharifs, have faced scrutiny regarding their loyalty and ability to govern justly. Nawaz's historically turbulent relationship with the army reflects a dynamic of both benefiting from their support and enduring their authority.³⁷ Although his brother Shehbaz may hold the title of prime minister, Nawaz's influence will likely dictate the future stability of the coalition, contingent upon his ability to appease the establishment.

Finally, according to the *Economist's Democracy Index 2023*, Pakistan experienced the greatest decline of any country in the region, dropping 11 places to 118th globally, with its

³⁰ Abid Hussain, "Who is Muhammad Aurangzeb, the man tasked with fixing Pakistan's economy?", *Al Jazeera*, 13 March 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/13/who-is-muhammad-aurangzeb-the-man-tasked-with-fixing-pakistans-economy?traffic_source=KeepReading.

³¹ Ahmed Pirzada, "The phoenix that never rises: what's holding back Pakistan's economy?", *Economics Observatory*, 22 March 2024, <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/the-phoenix-that-never-rises-whats-holding-back-pakistans-economy>.

³² Ahmed Pirzada, "The phoenix that never rises: what's holding back Pakistan's economy?", *Economics Observatory*, 22 March 2024, <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/the-phoenix-that-never-rises-whats-holding-back-pakistans-economy>.

³³ Abid Hussain, "Who is Muhammad Aurangzeb, the man tasked with fixing Pakistan's economy?", *Al Jazeera*, 13 March 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/13/who-is-muhammad-aurangzeb-the-man-tasked-with-fixing-pakistans-economy?traffic_source=KeepReading.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ "Pakistan army vows to punish 'planners' of violent protests", *Al Jazeera*, 7 June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/7/pakistan-military-says-will-punish-planners-of-may-9-violence>.

³⁷ "The Army Strikes Back | Nawaz Sharif's Return and Democratic Backsliding in Pakistan", *European Foundation of South Asian Studies*, 1 January 2024, <https://www.efsas.org/publications/articles-by-efsas/the-army-strikes-back-democratic-backsliding-in-pakistan/>.

score falling to 3.25.³⁸ The index highlighted meddling in the electoral process, government dysfunction and severe curtailment of judicial independence. Moreover, Pakistan was the only Asian country downgraded from a “hybrid regime” to an “authoritarian regime”, with the army cited as the primary force behind Khan’s downfall, intentionally hindering his party’s day-to-day operations.³⁹ Additionally, the *Freedom in the World Report of 2023* ranked Pakistan 35 out of 100, a slight decrease from 2022.⁴⁰ Pakistan also dropped from 161st to 164th position in the *United Nations (UN) Human Development Index*,⁴¹ and on the UN’s *E-Government Development Index*, it ranked 150 of 193, with a ranking of 106 of 193 on the *E-Participation Index*,⁴² based on data collected in 2022.⁴³

Concluding Remarks

Pakistan’s 2024 general elections marked a crucial juncture in the country’s history. Allegations of rigging and corruption had cast a shadow over the integrity of the electoral process, stirring doubt and controversy over their results. However, the polls also served to showcase the profound popular support garnered by Khan and his political party, the PTI. The electoral success of PTI-backed candidates demonstrated protest against the establishment’s political machinations, a rejection of the army’s political choices as well as a deep-seated disillusionment and frustration with the political landscape of Pakistan. Moreover, the success of PTI-backed candidates underscored a growing appetite for change.

Moving forward, Pakistan faces formidable and pressing challenges. The new government, led by Shehbaz, inherits a struggling economy burdened by debt and inflation. The appointment of Aurangzeb, a banking expert, as the finance minister reflects efforts to address these economic woes. However, navigating economic reform in Pakistan entails navigating a complex web of challenges, often with competing interests. The country’s reliance on the IMF introduces a significant dilemma, namely, reconciling reforms demanded by external creditors, such as the IMF, with those necessary to alleviate the hardships faced by ordinary citizens.

Balancing the imperative for reforms tailored to satisfy the creditors’ expectations against the urgent need to address the escalating cost of living for its populace constitutes Pakistan’s foremost economic conundrum. As Pakistan charts its economic course, striking a delicate balance between these divergent demands will be paramount to fostering prosperity for its

³⁸ “Pakistan slides 11 places on global democracy index, enters ‘authoritarian regime’ category”, *Arab News Pakistan*, 16 February 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2461316/pakistan>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Freedom in the World 2023 Report: Pakistan”, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2023>.

⁴¹ Anwar Iqbal, “Pakistan’s human development ranking declines”, *Dawn*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1821355>.

⁴² United Nations E-Government Knowledgebase, <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/128-Pakistan>.

⁴³ The UN’s *E-Government Development Index* is a comprehensive measure of three important aspects of e-governments: provision of online services, telecommunication connectivity and human capacity. The UN *E-Participation Index* is a measure of a state’s e-participation mechanisms employed by governments compared to other states. These mechanisms include the availability to access information for the public, the engagement with the public on policies and services, and empowering citizens to for decision-making processes.

society. However, the continuing erosion of democratic values undermines political stability and, in turn, weakens the new government's capacity to effectively tackle issues of economic management.

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