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Pakistan's Domestic Political Setting

Overview

Historically, constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy have fared poorly in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, marked by power struggles among presidents, prime ministers (PMs), and army chiefs. Congress has taken an interest in efforts to strengthen civilian rule, address corruption, and improve governance in the nuclear-armed state. The military has directly governed Pakistan for 33 of its 76 years of independence—most recently from 1999 to 2008—interspersed with periods of generally weak civilian governance. Pakistan has had five constitutions, the most recent ratified in 1973 and significantly modified several times since. The military has engaged in three outright seizures of power from elected governments: by Army Chiefs Gen. Ayub Khan in 1958, Gen. Zia ul-Haq in 1977, and Gen. Pervez Musharraf in 1999. After 1970, five successive governments were voted into power, but not until 2013 was a government voted out of power—all previous were removed directly by the army or through presidential orders. Of Pakistan's three most prominent PMs, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was executed; his daughter Benazir Bhutto was exiled and later assassinated; and three-time PM Nawaz Sharif was convicted on corruption charges and lived in self-imposed exile from 2019 until his late 2023 return to the country.

Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy in which the PM is head of government and the president is head of state. A bicameral parliament is composed of a 336-seat National Assembly (NA) and a 104-seat Senate. Both have directly elected representatives from each of the country's four provinces (Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KP, Punjab, and Sindh), as well as from the Islamabad Capital Territory—the quasi-independent regions of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan have no representation. NA members are elected from 266 districts; the body reserves 60 seats for women and 10 seats for religious minorities on a proportional basis. The PM is elected by the NA. The president, with a largely ceremonial role, is elected to a five-year term by an Electoral College composed of both chambers of parliament and members of the country's four provincial assemblies. NA and provincial assembly members are elected to five-year terms. Senate terms are six years, with elections every three years. Senate powers are limited, and only the NA can approve budget and finance bills.

Background: 2022 Political Upheaval

The 2018 elections brought a dramatic end to the decades-long domination of Pakistan's national politics by two dynastic parties as the relatively young Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI or Movement for Justice) party, led by former cricket superstar Imran Khan, swept a plurality (46%) of NA seats. The PTI also took charge of a coalition in the Punjab provincial assembly (about 60% of Pakistanis live in Punjab) while retaining the majority it won in KP in 2013.

Khan had no governance experience before 2018. His “Naya [New] Pakistan” vision sought creation of a “welfare state,” but the effort foundered due to the country's acute (and ongoing) financial crises. Most analysts saw Pakistan's military continuing to retain dominant influence over foreign and security policies. During Khan's tenure, Pakistan's economic woes grew more severe, requiring an International Monetary Fund bailout package in 2019 to ease the country's debt crisis.

A late 2021 power struggle between PM Khan and the then-Army Chief over the appointment of a new intelligence director may have contributed to the “establishment” (a euphemism for the military and intelligence services) withdrawing support for Khan—the same support that likely boosted the PTI in 2018 successes. Opposition parties narrowly passed a no-confidence motion against Khan, who was removed from office in April 2022. The NA then elected a new government under Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz's younger brother, in alliance with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and others among the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition formed in 2020. Khan and his party, animating many younger, urban, middle-class voters and still commanding widespread popular support, denounced his removal and demanded early elections.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) demurred and then delayed provincial and national elections. Khan was arrested on corruption charges in May 2023, a move some analysts say was provoked by his unprecedented public criticisms of security agencies and officials. His arrest sparked mass protests by PTI activists, including attacks on army installations. Thousands of demonstrators were arrested, and the military, in apparent concert with the PML-N-led government—set about dismantling the PTI through a pressure campaign and arrests of party leadership.

In August 2023, Khan was convicted, sentenced to prison, and banned from politics for five years. As per the constitution, a caretaker government was seated the same month to oversee the election process. Although required by mid-November under the constitution, the election was delayed, ostensibly to delimit new districts based on a recently completed census. As the election date approached, the government imposed restrictions on the PTI, including media and electoral symbol bans, and further criminal convictions of Khan. Even before the election took place, the *EIU Democracy Index 2023* downgraded Pakistan from a “hybrid regime” to an “authoritarian regime,” saying Pakistan's “regression” in 2023 was the worst in the region.

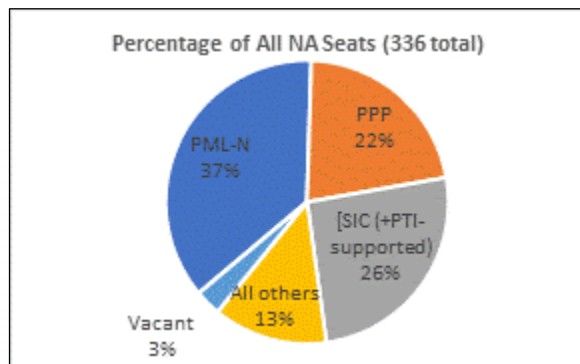
2024 National and Provincial Elections

Elections to seat Pakistan's 16th NA and four provincial assemblies took place on February 8. More than 5,100 NA candidates (94% of them male) and 167 registered parties

participated. Voter turnout was below 48% (down from above 52% in 2018), with campaigning and election day marred by terrorist attacks.

PTI-affiliated candidates bypassed restrictions by running as independents with PTI's support, and these candidates shocked observers by winning 93 of the 266 contested seats, a plurality. Observers called the outcome an unprecedented setback and loss of prestige for the country's establishment. Without allies, however, PTI-supported independents could not form a government, and their effort to obtain reserved seats by joining the Sunni Ittehad Council—a “non-parliamentary party”—was unsuccessful. The PML-N (with 75 contested seats) and PPP (54 seats) were able to form a coalition government with smaller parties and several independents under Shehbaz Sharif, who was elected PM on March 4 (see **Figure 1**). Maryam Sharif, Nawaz's daughter and Shehbaz's niece, became Punjab's first female chief minister. Approximately 5% of all NA votes were cast for the hardline Islamist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan party, which failed to win any seats.

Figure 1. Major Party Representation in Pakistan's 16th National Assembly



Source: CRS using data from Election Commission of Pakistan.

Note: PML-N: Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz; PPP: Pakistan People's Party; SIC: Sunni Ittehad Council/Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf.

Some observers credit the ECP for holding the election “in a reasonably orderly manner.” However, others called the 2024 election among the least credible in the country's history. Claims of “political engineering” by the establishment were widespread—one senior Pakistani official reportedly confessed to manipulating the outcome. The U.S. State Department commended all those who worked to protect Pakistan's democracy. Yet it also joined “credible international and local election observers in their assessment that these elections included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly” and condemned “electoral violence, restrictions on the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” The United Nations, European Union, and United Kingdom expressed similar concerns. More than two dozen House Members conveyed their concerns about alleged rigging to the Biden Administration and urged withholding recognition of Pakistan's new government until a credible investigation has been conducted, as promised by Pakistani authorities.

Leading Parties

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was established in 1993 by then-PM Nawaz Sharif as an

offshoot of the country's oldest party and the only major party existing at the time of independence. With a center-right and religiously conservative orientation, its core votebank is in Punjab. The party led the PDM opposition until Khan's 2022 removal and thereafter the national government until its term ended in August 2023. In 2024, the PML-N won 28% of contested NA seats with an estimated 24% of the vote.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was established in 1967 by former PM Z.A. Bhutto. Democratic socialist and formally secular, its main constituency is in Sindh, where it has long run the provincial government. PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is the son of former President Asif Zardari and former PM Benazir Bhutto. After April 2022, the PPP was part of the national ruling coalition, and in 2024, it won 20% of contested NA seats with about 14% of the vote.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), founded by Imran Khan in 1996, is centrist and nationalist in orientation, with anticorruption as its flagship campaign issue. The party's popularity surged in 2011, and it has led the provincial assembly in KP since 2013. Khan, a former cricket superstar, has been a vocal critic of the United States and, by some accounts, is sympathetic toward Islamist militants. In 2024, PTI-supported independents won 38% of contested NA seats with an estimated 31% of the 2024 vote.

Key Government Officials

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, joint owner of a family-run steel conglomerate with a reputation as an effective administrator, is PML-N president and was Punjab's longest-serving chief minister until being elected midterm PM in 2022.

Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, a chartered accountant and top Sharif family loyalist, served as finance minister four times from 1998 to 2023, coming under heavy criticism for his alleged economic mismanagement after mid-2022.

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, a journalist, news media mogul, and Pakistan Cricket Board Chairman, is a non-parliamentarian associated with neither the PML-N or PPP.

Finance Minister Muhammed Aurangzeb, also a non-parliamentarian, is a graduate of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, veteran senior banker, and political outsider who renounced his Dutch citizenship in order to join the cabinet.

Defense Minister Khwaja Asif, a PML-N stalwart, served as defense minister and then foreign minister from 2013-2018 before again taking the defense portfolio in 2022.

Chief of Army Staff Gen. Syed Asim Munir began a three-year appointment in November 2022. His brief tenure as head of Pakistan's main intelligence agency ended in 2019 after a reported clash with then-PM Khan.

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Director-General Lt. Gen. Nadeem Anjum, previously commander of the army's Karachi-based V Corps, began a three-year appointment in November 2021.

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