

Research Briefing

28 May 2024

By John Curtis

Pakistan: 2024 general election



Summary

- 1 Background and electoral system
- 2 General election
- 3 What next for Pakistan?

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Summary

Electoral system and headline results

On 8 February 2024, Pakistan held elections for its National Assembly and four provincial assemblies.

Pakistan has a parliamentary system of government, with most executive powers held by the Prime Minister. The President is head of state, but the role is largely ceremonial.

The National Assembly has 342 seats. 272 of those seats are directly elected using a first past the post voting system. 60 seats are reserved for women, and 10 seats are reserved for non-Muslims, and these reserved seats are awarded on a proportional basis based on the number of seats in the National Assembly won by the different political parties.

On election day independents aligned with former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PTI) party won the largest number of directly elected seats, 92, but were short of a majority.

Run up to the election

Imran Khan, leader of the PTI, was Prime Minister from 2018 to 2022, when he was [removed in a vote of no confidence](#). Shehbaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party, [became Prime Minister](#) forming a coalition with Bilawal Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

In October 2022, Imran Khan was barred by Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) from standing for election for five years and [removed from his parliamentary seat due to allegations of corruption](#). In May 2023 [Imran Khan was arrested on charges of corruption](#), sparking protests by his supporters, some of which turned violent, and [involved attacks on military installations](#). As a result, some protestors and senior leaders of the party were arrested and [sent to be tried by military courts](#).

In October 2023, former three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the PML-N party, brother of Shehbaz Sharif, [returned to Pakistan after four years in London](#). In 2018 he had been convicted and imprisoned on two charges of corruption but was [given leave to travel to the UK for medical treatment](#). On his return he launched legal challenges to his convictions, and within several weeks [both were quashed and the bar on his running for political office removed](#). Critics [suggested a deal with the country's military was behind his return](#) and the swift reversal of his legal fortunes.

In January 2024, the [courts ruled that the PTI had not held valid internal elections](#), and so were unable to stand as a party during the elections, therefore its candidates would have to stand as independents, and they were blocked from using their party symbol of the cricket bat on ballot papers. Party symbols are particularly important to help illiterate voters identify which party to vote for.

In January 2024 also, Imran Khan was convicted in two legal cases and sentenced to [10 years in jail for leaking state secrets](#), and to 14 years for [illegally selling state gifts](#).

Pakistan's military have removed democratically elected governments through coups on several occasions, and [remain a powerful political institution](#). The military are [credited in part with bringing Imran Khan to power in 2018](#), and are now believed to have worked to ensure his PTI party will not return to government and are [seen to be supporting](#) the PML-N/PPP parties.

Election results

In what was widely seen as a surprise result, due to its legal setbacks and the jailing of Imran Khan, independents backed by the PTI party won the largest number (92), of Pakistan's directly elected National Assembly seats.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) won 75 of the directly elected seats, and the Pakistan People's Party 54 seats. None of the parties had enough seats for a majority.

In the provincial elections, only in Balochistan was there a change in the parties in control of the provincial assemblies. Incumbent parties remained in power in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), including PTI-aligned independents in the KP assembly.

Claims of vote rigging and protests

In the days following the election, [protests broke out](#) as PTI supporters took to the streets alleging that there had been widespread vote-rigging.

After the election statements from the international community, including the UK, US and EU, expressed concerns over freedom of expression, and the upholding of human rights ahead of the election. The UK also [raised the issue](#) of party leaders and parties being excluded by legal processes and unable to use party symbols. The US [called for any claims of interference or fraud to be fully investigated](#).

Pakistan's foreign ministry [released its own statement](#) in response saying it was "surprised by the negative tone of some of these statements, which neither take into account the complexity of the electoral process, nor acknowledge the free and enthusiastic exercise of the right to vote by tens of millions of Pakistanis".

At the time of writing, election observer missions by the Commonwealth and EU have yet to report. However, the Commonwealth observer mission did release an [interim statement](#) (PDF) in which they said they had “received reports of incidents of intimidation and even violence against candidates, members of the media and other citizens”. The statement did not mention any problems with the counting of the votes themselves.

Allocation of reserved seats and new Government formed

Having been unable to stand as a party in the general election, the Election Commission ruled that the PTI’s independent candidates were [ineligible for the reserved seats](#) in both the National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies. The PTI then [announced it would join the Sunni Ittehad Council](#) (SIC), a right-wing Islamic political party, in a bid to make them eligible for the reserved seats. The SIC while registered as a political party did not actually contest the National Assembly elections.

In early March the [ECP ruled that the SIC wasn’t eligible](#) to claim its quota of the reserved seats, because the party had failed to submit a party list for reserved candidates before the ECP’s deadline of 22 February. The PTI/SIC have filed legal claims to appeal this decision. The Supreme Court is [scheduled to hear the latest appeal in June 2023](#).

The [allocation of reserved seats](#), and the joining of some independents to the party left the PML-N as the largest party, with a total of 123 seats. The PPP finished on 73 seats, making them the third largest party after the 92 PTI-backed independents.

Post election, the PML-N and PPP [formed a new coalition government](#) with six other smaller parties, giving them just over a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. Shehbaz Sharif, Prime Minister before the 2024 election, was elected to the office once again.

The PPP’s Asif Ali Zardari [was elected President](#) (the post is indirectly elected by members of the National and provincial assemblies) with the support of the PML-N-led governing coalition.

What next for Pakistan?

Analyses of the election results have said that the Pakistan’s military has retained its role as a key powerbroker, and even that the new government will [“will function as a junior partner to the military”](#).

Supporters of the PTI are still likely to try and [use street protests and campaigning](#) to try and provide political momentum for the party, but without resetting relations with the military, observers believe that Imran Khan is [unlikely to be able to change his political fortunes](#).

Pakistan has been suffering from a significant economic crisis. Having received a [bailout from the International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#) before the election, the new government is now [reportedly in talks with the IMF](#) for a new larger and longer-lasting funding programme. However, in return Pakistan will [likely have to implement painful and unpopular economic measures](#) such as raising taxes and cutting some spending.

Curbing rising terrorist violence, particularly in its Balochistan and KP provinces [will be another difficult issue for the new government](#), and Pakistan believes that Afghanistan is providing refuge for some terrorist groups, as well as support, [something the Taliban-regime deny](#).

Managing fraught relations with Afghanistan will be a key foreign policy task for the new government. Others will be continuing to build on already strong links with key ally China. Most [analysts believe](#) that [Pakistan is unlikely](#), at least in the short term, to be able to improve relations with its neighbour India.

1 Background and electoral system

1.1 Political system and main political parties

Pakistan's constitution and electoral system

Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy, with most executive powers held by the Prime Minister. Pakistan has four provinces, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh, as well as the federally administered Islamabad capital territory.

Parliament¹

Pakistan's parliament (Majlis-e-Shoora) is bicameral, meaning formed of two houses: the National Assembly and Senate.

The National Assembly has 342 seats. 272 of those seats are directly elected using a first past the post voting system with a single member representing each constituency. 60 seats are reserved for women, and these are awarded on a proportional basis by province, based on the number of seats in the National Assembly in each province won by the different political parties. 10 seats are also reserved for non-Muslims, and these awarded on a proportional basis of the number of seats won nationwide by political parties in the National Assembly. The National Assembly has five-year terms.

The Senate has 96 seats, and is indirectly elected, with 92 of the seats elected by the members of the provincial assemblies. Each provincial assembly gets to elect 23 Senators, one of these Senators from each province has to be a non-Muslim (four in total), four women (16 in total), and four technocrats (including ulema, Muslim legal scholars, 16 in total). The remaining four Senators represent the Islamabad Capital Territory (which must include one woman and one technocrat), they are elected by members of the National Assembly. Senators serve six-year terms, and one-half of the membership is renewed every three years.

Prime Minister and Government²

Prime Ministers exercise executive power in Pakistan. Prime Ministers are elected by the National Assembly during their first sitting after a general election (after they elect a Speaker and Deputy Speaker). Candidates for Prime Ministers can only be drawn from the Muslim members of the National

¹ This section is taken from EuropaWorld, [Pakistan: Profile: Constitution and Government](#), accessed 19 March 2024; and National Assembly: [Constitution of Pakistan](#) (PDF) Articles 50-76.

² This section is drawn from National Assembly: [Constitution of Pakistan](#) (PDF) Articles 90-95.

Assembly. To win office a candidate must win a majority of votes of members of the National Assembly present and voting.

Ministers are appointed by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister. Ministers must be drawn from members of both houses of parliament, though no more than a quarter of federal ministers can come from the Senate.

No Pakistani Prime Minister has ever served a full five-year term in office. They have variously resigned, been dismissed by Presidents (when presidential powers were greater), assassinated, ousted in coups, dismissed or disqualified by courts, and in 2022 Imran Khan became the first to be removed by a vote of no confidence in the National Assembly.³

President

The head of state is the President, who must be a Muslim, and no younger than 45 years old.⁴ The President is elected by an electoral college of members of both houses of Pakistan's parliament: the National Assembly and the Senate, and members of Pakistan's four provincial assemblies. Presidential terms are five years, and Presidents are limited to serving no more than two consecutive terms.

The role of the President in Pakistan is largely ceremonial, with executive power exercised by the Prime Minister, and the President is directed by the constitution to "act [on and] in accordance with the advice of the Cabinet [or the Prime Minister]".⁵ The President has powers to withhold assent to legislation (though this can be overridden by parliament), to appoint senior members of the judiciary, grant pardons, and some powers over foreign affairs though these are largely exercised on advice from the Prime Minister.⁶

The President at the time of the February 2024 elections was Dr Arif-ur-Rehman Alvi of the PTI party, who was elected in 2018. His first term should have ended in September 2023, however as the parliament was dissolved before this date no election could take place, and the constitution sets out the President will remain in post until a successor is chosen. Under this scenario the constitution stipulates presidential elections must be held within 30 days of the general election, meaning the election would have to be held by the 9 March 2024.

Pakistan's political parties

There are three principal political parties in Pakistan who have led governments over the last several decades.

³ "[No Pakistani prime minister has completed a full term in office](#)", Al Jazeera, 9 April 2022.

⁴ National Assembly: [Constitution of Pakistan](#) (PDF), Article 41(2).

⁵ Pakistan National Assembly, [Constitution of Pakistan](#) (PDF), Article 48, accessed 19 March 2023

⁶ See Daily Pakistan, [What are the constitutional powers and duties of Pakistan's President?](#), 4 September 2018; and Pakistan National Assembly, [Constitution of Pakistan](#) (PDF), Articles 41-48, 75, 175, 232, and 243, accessed 19 March 2023.

PML-N

The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) was established in 1962 as a successor to the (All India) Muslim League, which was the party of Pakistan's founder and first Governor General Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The PML split into two factions in 1993, one of them was led by Nawaz Sharif, which became known as Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N).⁷

Sharif was Prime Minister on three occasions (1990-93, 1997-99, 2013-17). His second stint in office was ended after he was ousted in a military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf.⁸

The PML-N has been led by Nawaz's brother Shehbaz Sharif since 2018, after the Supreme Court ruled Nawaz could no longer lead the party due to allegations of corruption, though he was then made "leader for life".⁹

The PML-N's powerbase is in Punjab, the country's largest province. It is a centre-right party that attracts the votes of religious conservatives.¹⁰ The party has been a "long-time critic of Pakistan's army for its interference in the country's political affairs".¹¹ However, as explored in the next section, its candidate for Prime Minister in the 2024 elections, Nawaz Sharif, is now widely seen as being the preferred candidate of the armed forces.

PPP

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1967. He was President of Pakistan from 1971-3, then Prime Minister from 1973 to 1977, when he was removed in a military coup led by General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq. In 1979 he was convicted of murdering a political opponent and hanged, the trial was "widely condemned as unfair".¹²

Zulfikar's daughter Benazir Bhutto became leader of the PPP and was Prime Minister twice serving from 1988-1990 and 1993-96. She was assassinated in 2007 while campaigning for the 2008 elections. Her husband Asif Ali Zardari became co-Chairman of the PPP after her death alongside their son Bilawal. Zardari was President of Pakistan between 2008 and 2013.¹³ Bilawal Bhutto Zardari became sole leader of the party in 2021.¹⁴ After the removal of Imran Khan's government in a vote of no-confidence in April 2022 (see next section), Bilawal Bhutto Zardari became foreign minister in the PML-N/PPP coalition government.

⁷ BBC Monitoring, [Political Party: Pakistan: Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz \(PML-N\)](#), 2 August 2023

⁸ As above.

⁹ "[Pakistani ex-PM Nawaz Sharif banned from leading his party](#)", BBC News, 21 February 2018.

¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, [Pakistan's Domestic Political Setting](#) (PDF), 16 December 2022.

¹¹ BBC Monitoring, [Political Party: Pakistan: Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz \(PML-N\)](#), 2 August 2023.

¹² BBC Monitoring, [Political Party: Pakistan: Pakistan Peoples Party \(PPP\)](#), 2 August 2023.

¹³ As above.

¹⁴ "[Bilawal elected unopposed as PPP chief](#)", The News, 8 January 2021.

The PPP supports democratic socialism, or what Zulfiqar the party's founder called "Islamic socialism", while supporting strong national defence.¹⁵ The party's main powerbase is in Sindh, the second-largest province.

PTI

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PTI) party is a relative newcomer. It was first founded in 1996 by Imran Khan, former captain of Pakistan's cricket team. The party ran in its first election in 1997, contesting 134 seats out of 206, but didn't win a single seat. In the 2002 election Imran Khan won the PTI's first and only seat. The party boycotted the 2008 elections.¹⁶

The PTI's breakthrough year was in 2013 when it won the third largest number of seats and was the second largest in terms of share of the popular vote. The party's "populist and Islamist rhetoric" in that election was credited with helping it gain popularity.¹⁷

In the 2018 general election, the PTI won the largest number of seats in the National Assembly and entered government for the first time by forming a coalition with the Muttahida Qaumi Movement – Pakistan (MQM) party, and other smaller parties and independents. Imran Khan became Prime Minister. The arrests on corruption charges of several prominent members of the PML-N in the run up to the poll, and the sentencing of Nawaz Sharif to jail three weeks before the election, were used as evidence by some to claim that Pakistan's powerful military was intervening in politics to support the PTI.¹⁸

The PTI's ideology, is to a large degree an extension of Imran Khan's own political thought.¹⁹ Imran Khan "started the PTI as a middle-class movement against elite politicians", according to one analysis, though the party's framing of who is in the elite has changed as it spent time in government.²⁰ It has more recently put a greater emphasis on "the rights of the poor", and improving social welfare.²¹ The party's 2024 manifesto (see section 2.1) was framed with references to Islamic history and thought.

The PTI's has performed strongly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as well as in Punjab.

¹⁵ See, BBC Monitoring, [Political Party: Pakistan: Pakistan Peoples Party \(PPP\)](#), 2 August 2023; Owen Bennett-Jones, *The Bhutto Dynasty*, 2020, p59; and Congressional Research Service, [Pakistan's Domestic Political Setting](#) (PDF), 16 December 2022.

¹⁶ Shiraz Sheikh, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in Pakistan: The Role of the Military and Political Parties*, 2020, pp 182-3.

¹⁷ As above.

¹⁸ "[Imran Khan and the military: Allies today, foes tomorrow?](#)", Al Jazeera, 8 August 2018.

¹⁹ "Opinion: [PTI: Ideology and politics](#)", *The Nation*, 7 March 2018.

²⁰ "[Opinion: What is the PTI's ideology?](#)", *The News*, 6 May 2019.

²¹ As above, and International Development Committee, *UK aid to Pakistan*, 8 October 2019, Written Evidence: [Department for International Development \(JAP0014\)](#).

1.2

Lead up to the general election 2022-24

These events are looked at in greater detail in Commons Library briefing: [Politics in Pakistan 2022-24 and upcoming elections](#), 13 February 2024.

April 2022: Imran Khan removed as Prime Minister

Imran Khan was ousted as Prime Minister in April 2022 after losing a vote of no-confidence.²² His PTI party had come into office for the first time in 2018 after winning the most seats in that year's election, as part of a coalition.

Mr Khan lost the support of his coalition partners after rising inflation and other economic problems seriously affected living standards in the country. He was also reported to have fallen out with the country's military leadership, who maintain a powerful influence over the country's politics.²³ The support of the military is also partly credited to have brought the PTI to power in 2018.²⁴

The new Prime Minister was Shehbaz Sharif, leader of the PML-N party, who had formed a coalition when in opposition called the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) with the PPP, their traditional rivals, and other small parties. This PDM coalition formed the new government.²⁵

October 2022: Khan retains popular support but convicted on corruption charges

Despite the economic problems in Pakistan and his removal from office, Imran Khan still maintained popular appeal and a large, dedicated core of supporters. He held mass rallies in the months after his ousting and campaigned for early elections (elections were not due until October 2023).²⁶ The PDM government refused to bring them forward.²⁷

In October 2022 the Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP), disqualified Imran Khan from standing for election for five years because they said he had broken the law by selling gifts that he had received while Prime Minister.²⁸

The ECP also barred Imran Khan from parliament, forcing him to vacate his seat in the National Assembly.²⁹

²² "[Imran Khan ousted as Pakistan's PM after vote](#)", BBC News, 10 April 2022.

²³ United States Institute for Peace, [Pakistan's Parliamentary Period Ends as Election Uncertainty Looms](#), 10 August 2023.

²⁴ As above.

²⁵ "[Pakistan: Shehbaz Sharif chosen as PM after week-long uncertainty](#)", BBC News, 11 April 2022.

²⁶ "[Rallies show Pakistan's ex-PM Khan remains political force](#)", AP News, 7 September 2022.

²⁷ "[Former PM Imran Khan dominates Pakistan by-elections](#)" Al-Jazeera, 17 October 2022.

²⁸ "[Ex-Pakistan PM Imran Khan barred from elections for five years](#)", The Guardian, 21 October 2022.

²⁹ "[Pakistan election body disqualifies ex-PM Khan from public office for misdeclaration of assets](#)", Arab News, 21 October 2022.

November 2022: Khan injured in shooting, blames the military

On 3 November 2022 a gunman opened fire on a convoy carrying Imran Khan, wounding him in the lower leg and killing a supporter.³⁰ The day after the shooting Imran Khan accused the Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and military officials of being behind the attempt on his life.³¹ Both strongly denied any involvement.³²

January 2023: PTI dissolve provincial assemblies to try and force elections

In January 2023 Imran Khan dissolved the two provincial assemblies his party controlled in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, in order to hold provincial elections he judged he would win.³³ He hoped this move would help build political momentum ahead of the national elections and prove the unpopularity of the ruling PDM coalition.

The regional governors, who were chosen by the PDM government, did not set dates for the provincial elections, and the ECP did not start organising them saying they could not do so without the authorisation of the governors.³⁴

The country's then President, Arif Alvi of the PTI, intervened, unilaterally setting election dates, citing the constitutional requirement for elections to be held after the dissolving of the assemblies, and his role to uphold the constitution.³⁵

The Supreme Court then ruled that the ECP must set dates for the elections. The ECP at first complied, but then postponed them again citing security concerns and a lack of funding.³⁶

The PDM government, angry at what they perceived as political interference by the Supreme Court, passed legislation limiting the powers of its Chief Justice to unilaterally intervene in certain legal issues.³⁷ The Court has barred the legislation from being implemented while it examines its constitutionality.³⁸

³⁰ [“Imran Khan wounded in ‘assassination attempt’ in Pakistan”](#), The Guardian, 3 November 2022.

³¹ [“Imran Khan says Pakistan PM Sharif involved in plot to kill him”](#), Al Jazeera, 4 November 2022.

³² [“Imran Khan accuses Pakistan prime minister of conspiring to kill him”](#), Financial Times, 4 November 2022.

³³ [“Another Khan party-led provincial assembly dissolved in Pakistan”](#), Al Jazeera, 18 January 2023.

³⁴ [“Can president ‘unilaterally’ announce election date?”](#), GeoTV, 20 February 2023.

³⁵ [“Pakistan’s president slammed for declaring poll date in provinces”](#), Al Jazeera, 21 February 2023.

³⁶ [“Pakistan election body says ready for national polls in October”](#), Al Jazeera, 21 July 2023.

³⁷ [“NA passes bill to curtail CJP’s suo motu powers”](#), Dawn, 29 March 2023.

³⁸ [“SC adjourns hearing of petitions challenging Practice & Procedure Act 2023 till tomorrow”](#), Business Recorder, 9 October 2023.

May 2023: Khan convicted of corruption sparking violent protests

As well as facing charges of corruption, Imran Khan is being investigated in a growing number of other legal cases. It was reported in July 2023 these numbered over 150.³⁹ The former Prime Minister said these were all part of a political campaign to prevent him and his party from holding office again.⁴⁰

On 9 May 2023, while in court on charges relating to corruption, Imran Khan was arrested in relation to another legal case.⁴¹ His arrest sparked mass protests across the country by his supporters, which turned violent in some places, with clashes with the police leading to several deaths. Unprecedentedly some protestors attacked military buildings, and the residence of a senior army general was ransacked in Lahore.⁴² Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial governments requested the military deploy personnel to help restore order.

May-June 2023: PTI supporters and senior leaders jailed

Hundreds of PTI supporters were arrested in the aftermath of the violent protests, and some were handed over to be tried in military courts.⁴³

Among those arrested were several senior PTI leaders including former foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and PTI Secretary General Asad Umar.⁴⁴

In the weeks following their arrests, a number of these leaders announced they were resigning from their posts and leaving politics. It was reported that these politicians had been forced to step down, with one individual claiming anonymously to the Guardian they had been tortured by the military while in custody and threatened until they agreed to leave the party.⁴⁵

August 2023: Elections postponed to redraw constituency boundaries

The country's parliament was dissolved in early August 2023, a few days before the end of its five-year term.⁴⁶ This meant that as per the country's constitution, elections should have been held within 90 days of dissolution.

³⁹ [“Treason, contempt, exposing secrets. Legal challenges against Pakistan’s Imran Khan keep growing”](#), AP News, 24 July 2023.

⁴⁰ [“Pakistan’s Imran Khan openly accuses military of trying to destroy his party”](#), Reuters, 5 June 2023.

⁴¹ [“Why was former Pakistan PM Imran Khan arrested?”](#), BBC News, 10 May 2023.

⁴² [“Pakistan calls in army to stop protest violence after ex-PM Khan’s arrest”](#), Reuters, 10 May 2023.

⁴³ [“Pakistan cracks down on Imran Khan’s supporters after violence”](#), Reuters, 10 May 2023.

⁴⁴ [“7 leaders of PTI sent to Adiala Jail under 16 MPO”](#), The Nation, 12 May 2023.

⁴⁵ [“Imran Khan’s political games leave him isolated as Pakistan army destroys party”](#), The Guardian, 3 June 2023.

⁴⁶ [“Pakistan parliament dissolved to hold national election”](#), Reuters, 10 August 2023.

However, the PDM government announced a few days before parliament was dissolved that it wanted the constituency boundaries for the election to be based on the most recent census conducted earlier in 2023.⁴⁷ The ECP said it would take around four months to complete the re-drawing of the constituencies, and so the elections would have to be delayed. As per the constitution, a caretaker government took over the running the country between the dissolution of parliament and the election of a new Prime Minister.⁴⁸

Complaints about fairness of redrawn constituency boundaries

The redrawing of electoral constituencies for national and provincial elections at the end of 2023 was criticised by some as favouring Nawaz Sharif's PML-N party.⁴⁹ Though the PML-N also said it had been the victim of badly drawn boundaries.⁵⁰ The ECP defended the exercise, saying criticisms were the usual practice of parties trying to politicise the process.⁵¹

November 2023: Elections scheduled for February 2024 and Nawaz Sharif corruption conviction overturned

In September, the ECP said that elections would be held in the last week of January 2024.⁵² There were concerns that an exact date hadn't been set and that the elections may be delayed again, with some citing the precedent of the provincial elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that were never held despite the insistence of the Supreme Court and the President.⁵³

Concerns were also raised about the fairness of the upcoming elections and the security and safety of voters with terrorist organisations having targeted previous polls.⁵⁴

On 21 October, former three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the PML-N party, brother of Shehbaz Sharif, returned to Pakistan after four years in London.⁵⁵ Nawaz Sharif was convicted and imprisoned on two charges of corruption in 2018 but was given leave to travel to the UK for medical

⁴⁷ "[Pakistan election to be delayed by new census](#)", Reuters, 5 August 2023.

⁴⁸ "[Who is Pakistan's caretaker PM Kakar and what challenges lie ahead for him?](#)", Reuters, 15 August 2023.

⁴⁹ "[Pakistan election commission accused of changing voting map to favour ex-PM](#)", The Guardian, 29 November 2023.

⁵⁰ "[The Delimitation of Pakistan's Democracy](#)", The Diplomat, 26 December 2023.

⁵¹ As above.

⁵² "[Pakistan will hold parliamentary elections at the end of January, delaying a vote due in November](#)", AP News, 21 September 2023.

⁵³ "[Political parties in Pakistan demand exact date for January 2024 general elections](#)", The Print, 22 September 2023.

⁵⁴ Freedom House, [Election Watch 2024: Country Overview: Pakistan](#), accessed 1 March 2024.

⁵⁵ "[Former Pakistan premier Nawaz Sharif vows to work toward economic recovery](#)", Reuters, 21 October 2023.

treatment.⁵⁶ On his return he launched legal challenges to his convictions, and within several weeks both were quashed and the bar on his running for political office removed.⁵⁷ Critics suggested a deal with the country's military was behind his return and the swift reversal of his legal fortunes.⁵⁸

On 2 November the ECP announced that the election date would now be 8 February 2024.⁵⁹

January 2024: PTI loses court case on election symbol

In January 2024, the PTI lost a legal appeal in the Supreme Court against a December 2023 order by the ECP that they hadn't held free and fair internal party elections as mandated by law.⁶⁰ This meant the PTI candidates could not use the party's traditional cricket bat symbol on ballot papers (important in areas where there is low literacy), and that [the candidates would have to stand as independents](#).⁶¹ This latter condition meant the PTI would be prevented from gaining [reserved seats in the National Assembly](#), 266 of the 336 parliamentary seats are directly elected, but 60 are reserved for women and 10 for non-Muslims. These seats are allotted by the proportion of votes gained by each party in the different Provinces.⁶²

January 2024: Khan given lengthy sentences in two legal cases

At the end of January, Imran Khan was convicted in two legal cases. He was sentenced to [10 years in jail for leaking state secrets](#),⁶³ and then to 14 years, alongside his wife Bushra Bibi, for [illegally selling state gifts](#).⁶⁴ Mr Khan was also banned for 10 years from holding political office. Mr Khan claimed the trials, held just over a week before the elections, [were being rushed for political purposes and his lawyers were not able to cross-examine witnesses](#).⁶⁵

⁵⁶ "[Nawaz Sharif: Ex-PM leaves Pakistan for medical treatment](#)", BBC News, 19 November 2019.

⁵⁷ "[Pakistan court ruling allows ex-PM Sharif to run for fourth time](#)", Reuters, 8 January 2024.

⁵⁸ "[Has Pakistan's top court cleared former PM Sharif's way back to power?](#)", Al Jazeera, 9 January 2024.

⁵⁹ "[Pakistan to hold delayed elections on February 8, electoral commission says](#)", Al Jazeera, 2 November 2023.

⁶⁰ "[Pakistan ex-PM's party loses election symbol. Will it hurt its prospects?](#)", Al Jazeera, 23 January 2024.

⁶¹ "[PTI bat-tered, loses iconic electoral symbol as SC restores ECP order](#)", Dawn, 13 January 2024.

⁶² National Assembly of Pakistan, [Composition](#), accessed 1 March 2024.

⁶³ "[Imran Khan: Pakistan former PM jailed for 10 years in state secrets case](#)", BBC News, 30 January 2024.

⁶⁴ "[Imran Khan: Former Pakistan PM and wife Bushra Bibi jailed for corruption](#)", BBC News, 31 January 2024.

⁶⁵ "[Imran Khan, Pakistan former PM, sentenced to 14 years in prison for corruption](#)", The Guardian, 31 January 2024.

1.3

Influence of military and fragility of civilian rule

Pakistan's military has always been a dominant force in Pakistani politics. Even when they have not been in direct charge after forcing out civilian governments in military coups (see Box below), they have ensured that those leading governments do not challenge their authority. Shiraz Sheikh, in a

book on the role of the military in Pakistan, states that “a substantive part of democratic rule has also been under [the] indirect shadow of the military”.⁶⁶

Aqil Shah, in the article quoted above writes about the indirect methods the military uses to maintain their power:

Regardless of who holds the reins of the government in Islamabad, the military has always been and continues to be the de facto arbiter of politics in the country. Short of a coup, the generals have typically maintained their supremacy and control by cobbling together “king’s parties”—alliances of convenience and opportunity among the country’s politicians—to counter any civilian challengers. The military puts these concocted factions in power by engineering elections.⁶⁷

Shah also warns that the PTI’s opponents, “the civilian political parties that have long sought to minimize the military’s control of Pakistani politics”, by which he means the PML-N and PPP, who have both had leaders removed by the military in coups, “have become even further compromised in the process, allowing the reassertion of the military’s primacy and weakening the country’s already beleaguered democratic norms and institutions”.⁶⁸

In an analysis for the think tank RUSI, former UK diplomat Tim Willasey-Wilsey, argues that while “in formal terms, there has been no coup”, the “events in Pakistan since the violence of 9 May 2023 have been designed to prevent [...] Imran Khan and [...] the PTI [...] from contesting the elections”.⁶⁹

Willasey-Wilsey warns that head of the Pakistan Army, General Asim Munir’s “forceful actions” have “placed the army in a difficult position”. He states that while “the army has nearly always been popular in Pakistan, particularly in the Punjab. Its present poor reputation will worry both senior and junior officers”.⁷⁰

He also predicts that if “Imran and his PTI are no longer available as a channel for dissent, the people will choose nondemocratic means to express their frustration and fury”.⁷¹

1 Military coups and military rule in Pakistan⁷²

⁶⁶ Shiraz Sheikh, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in Pakistan: The Role of the Military and Political Parties*, 2020, P XV.

⁶⁷ As above.

⁶⁸ Foreign Affairs, Aqil Shah, “[Pakistan’s Military Still Runs the Show](#)”, 16 June 2023.

⁶⁹ RUSI, Tim Willasey-Wilsey, [Pakistan: The Coup That Was Not a Coup](#), 23 June 2023.

⁷⁰ As above.

⁷¹ As above.

⁷² This section is based on three sources: Shiraz Sheikh, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in Pakistan: The Role of the Military and Political Parties*, 2020, pp XV-XVII; Europa World, [Pakistan: Contemporary Political History](#), accessed 6 October 2023; and National Assembly of Pakistan, [Parliamentary History](#), accessed 6 October 2023.

The military in Pakistan has ruled the country for a longer period than fully democratic regimes.

Pakistan's first suspension of democracy occurred in October 1958 when the country's President and former general Iskandar Ali Mirza, suspended the constitution, dismissed the national and provincial governments, dissolved all the political parties and imposed martial law. A few weeks later Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, General Ayub Khan, removed Mirza from office and installed himself as President.

The country was ruled under martial law until June 1962.

A new constitution was framed in 1962, but this was formulated to ensure General Ayub's regime stayed in power although this was now technically a civilian government. All executive power was vested in the President, he appointed provincial governors and the cabinet, and elections for the parliament were indirect.

Ayub's time in power came to an end in March 1969, when another military coup was launched by General Yahya Khan, who reimposed martial law.

Khan however prepared Pakistan to hold the first general election for the National Assembly, which was held in December 1970.

In December 1971, after the military defeat in the Bangladesh War of Independence, Khan handed over power to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whose party the PPP had won the greatest number of seats in what was then West Pakistan in the 1970 election.

Bhutto's democratic government was overthrown by General Zia-ul Haq in July 1977. His military regime ruled the country for the longest period under martial law in Pakistan's history. In 1985, elections were held for the National Assembly but on a non-party basis.

In August 1988 General Zia was killed in an air crash, democracy was restored with fresh elections being held in November that year.

In October 1999, the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced he was dismissing the head of the armed forces General Pervez Musharraf. Hours later Musharraf removed Sharif in a bloodless coup.

General Musharraf officially appointed himself as President of Pakistan in 2001. Parliamentary elections were held in 2002, but the leaders of the two main parties Benazir Bhutto (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif (PML-N) were blocked from standing due to corruption convictions, and Sharif had been exiled to Saudi Arabia. Musharraf stood down in August 2008, after the new National Assembly elected in February 2008 started moves to impeach him, and democracy and civilian rule were then fully restored.

2 General election

2.1 Election campaign and party manifestos

Campaign and main issues

Pakistan has been suffering an ongoing financial crisis, with significant external debts, and in July 2023 the IMF and the PDM-led Government agreed a new bailout programme, without which Pakistan would have likely defaulted on its debts.⁷³

AP News, in a pre-election briefing, said the incoming government would have “a long to-do list”, with the main issues “fixing the economy, improving relations with the neighbouring, Taliban-run Afghanistan, repairing crumbling infrastructure and resolving year-round power outages”, as well as “containing religious and separatist militant groups”.⁷⁴ The news agency also reported that only an estimated 5% of homes destroyed or damaged in the [huge floods of 2022](#) had been fully rebuilt.⁷⁵

Al Jazeera stated the youth vote was “critical” in Pakistan, noting “Of the 128 million voters, the largest number – 44 percent – are below the age of 35”, and the “second largest group of voters are between the ages of 36 and 45, constituting 22.3 percent of the electorate”.⁷⁶

PML-N manifesto

Nawaz Sharif’s focus on the campaign trail was “bringing jobs back and food prices down”, according to the Guardian.⁷⁷ The [PML-N manifesto](#) emphasised Pakistan’s impressive economic performance under previous PML-N-led governments. After the elections the party promised its “top-most priority” would be:

[T]o return the economy to the path of sustainable growth, reduce inflation, unemployment and poverty, improve Pakistan’s foreign exchange position and

⁷³ See Commons Library, [Politics in Pakistan 2022-24 and upcoming elections](#), 13 February 2024, section 1.4.

⁷⁴ “[Pakistan’s election: Who’s running, what’s the mood and will anything change?](#)”, AP News, 8 February 2024.

⁷⁵ As above.

⁷⁶ “[Pakistan election 2024: By the numbers](#)”, Al Jazeera, 5 February 2024.

⁷⁷ “[Army looms large as Nawaz Sharif eases towards fourth term in Pakistan](#)”, The Guardian, 5 February 2024.

make Pakistan self-reliant on this front by increasing exports, and implement the much-needed structural reforms.⁷⁸

It promised this economic growth would be “inclusive” stating “We will endeavour to improve the lives, living standards and economic opportunities of each and every Pakistani”.⁷⁹ The party also said it would reform institutions such as the courts to speed up judicial processes, and “civil service reforms and empowerment of local governments”. In addition, the manifesto focused on policies to green Pakistan’s energy sector, reduce air pollution, and improve climate change resilience.⁸⁰

In foreign policy, Nawaz Sharif offered a “message of peace” to India. During his second term as Prime Minister 1997-1999, Mr Sharif was credited as having improved India-Pakistan relations, though the outbreak of the war over the disputed region in Kashmir from May-July 1999 ended the thaw (there is evidence that the Pakistani military did not disclose all the details of the initial military operation to the Prime Minister).⁸¹ The party’s manifesto also promised collaboration with other neighbours such as Iran, Afghanistan and China, as well as building relations with the United States based on “equality and mutuality of interests”.⁸²

PPP manifesto

The [PPP manifesto](#) promised to build a “New People’s Economy”, with pledges to double real incomes for wage earners, increase existing cash transfers to the poorest with new schemes for poorer families with children, as well as providing “free primary healthcare and medicines across the country”, and “free treatment for chronic diseases of the heart, liver, and kidney”. As part of a “Green New Deal”, public private partnerships would be used to build solar parks and schemes to attract greater private investment in renewable energy. The manifesto also talked about developing domestic energy sources, including converting power plants “from imported coal to domestic coal”.⁸³

The PPP stated they would address fiscal imbalances and increase revenues by increasing the tax base and “eradicating untargeted subsidies and tax expenditures”.⁸⁴ The BBC described the PPP’s manifesto as “making a series of expensive pledges, like doubling wages, claiming the budget could be found through government cuts and subsidies for the wealthy”.⁸⁵

In foreign policy, the PPP said it sought “constructive engagement” with its neighbours such as Afghanistan, with greater cooperation to try and tackle

⁷⁸ PML-N, [Manifesto in English](#), accessed 20 March 2024.

⁷⁹ As above.

⁸⁰ As above.

⁸¹ “[Kargil: The forgotten victims of the world's highest war](#)”, BBC News, 26 July 2019.

⁸² International Centre for Peace Studies, [Decoding the 2024 Election Manifestos of Political Parties in Pakistan](#), 5 February 2024.

⁸³ Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarians, [Manifesto](#), accessed 20 March 2024, p47.

⁸⁴ Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarians, [Manifesto](#), accessed 20 March 2024, p8.

⁸⁵ “[Pakistan election 2024: Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan reverse roles BBC News](#)”, 31 January 2024.

the threat of terrorism in the country, while still supporting its policy of “non-interference” in the country.⁸⁶ With India the manifesto called for “conflict-resolution instead of India’s investment in conflict perpetuation”.⁸⁷ It called for greater links with partners across the Asian continent, “reviving a Pakistan-U.S. Strategic Dialogue”, and to “engage extensively with its traditional and trusted western partners, such as the UK, and the EU”.⁸⁸

PTI manifesto

The [PTI’s manifesto](#) (PDF) emphasised the importance of Islamic values, with the introduction saying it “Articulates a vision for Pakistan deeply rooted in the spirit of the first Muslim State, Medina”.⁸⁹

The PTI proposed social and political reforms. Social reforms included introducing a universal health card, providing a social security system, and reforming the education system. Political reforms included direct popular elections for the role of Prime Minister, reducing the term of the National Assembly from five to four years and directly electing 50% of Senators.⁹⁰

The party also pledged to tackle corruption, committed to “the overhaul of the judicial system”,⁹¹ and the formation of a new body based on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to “to bridge the existing divides in the country”.⁹²

In foreign policy, the PTI called for a “Pakistan first” policy, “promoting [Pakistan’s] multi-faceted interests worldwide”, using “Islamic principles” of “justice, equity, and peace when selecting coalition partners for any task or project”, and to “distance ourselves from alliances that cause fragmentation, terrorism, and social disruption in our society”. In addition, the manifesto committed to “endeavour to maintain and further promote our special relations with countries of the Muslim world as well as our all-weather ally China”.⁹³

Terrorist attacks

In the last few years Pakistan has seen an upsurge in terrorist violence. In the first 11 months of 2023, there were 664 terrorist attacks across the country according to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, an increase of 67% over the same time period in 2022.⁹⁴ Around 93% of these

⁸⁶ Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarians, [Manifesto](#), accessed 20 March 2024, p55.

⁸⁷ Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarians, [Manifesto](#), accessed 20 March 2024, p56.

⁸⁸ Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarians, [Manifesto](#), accessed 20 March 2024, pp 57-58.

⁸⁹ PTI, [MANIFESTO: Empowering Pakistan for a Just, Progressive, and Inclusive Future](#) (PDF), p xxviii.

⁹⁰ “[Political parties amp up electioneering as Feb 8 polls inch closer](#)”, Dawn 28 January 2024.

⁹¹ PTI, [MANIFESTO: Empowering Pakistan for a Just, Progressive, and Inclusive Future](#) (PDF), p114.

⁹² PTI, [MANIFESTO: Empowering Pakistan for a Just, Progressive, and Inclusive Future](#) (PDF), p27.

⁹³ PTI, [MANIFESTO: Empowering Pakistan for a Just, Progressive, and Inclusive Future](#) (PDF), p101.

⁹⁴ “[What explains the dramatic rise in armed attacks in Pakistan?](#)”, Al Jazeera, 21 December 2023.

attacks took place in two of Pakistan's four provinces: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, both of which border Afghanistan.⁹⁵

Elections have previously been the target of terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The Council on Foreign Relations states that in the run up to the previous parliamentary elections in 2018 the Pakistan Taliban/TTP group “targeted campaign rallies and polling places [...] including an attack in Mastung in July 2018 that killed more than one hundred forty people and wounded nearly two hundred others”.⁹⁶ Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, notes that during the 2013 election campaign, “there were more than 119 [terrorist] attacks in the three weeks leading up to election day”.⁹⁷

The 2024 elections also saw violent attacks. On 7 February, the day before the election, two political offices in Balochistan province were targeted by bombs, killing at least 30 people. Pakistan's Islamic State branch claimed responsibility for the blasts.⁹⁸

On the election day itself the Pakistani military's media wing, the Inter-Services Public Relations, reported that 51 terrorist attacks took place, during which at least 12 people, including ten security personnel, were killed and 39 others injured.⁹⁹

Polling and expected results

Polls from January 2024 showed that Imran Khan had the highest national approval rating of any party leader at 57%, however Nawaz Sharif was narrowly behind with 52%, a significant increase since June 2023 when his approval rate was just 36%.¹⁰⁰ They also showed the PML-N and the PTI in a near tie in terms of voting intention in Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, with 34% of those polled saying they would vote for the PTI and 32% PML-N, within the margin of error.¹⁰¹

Analyses released before the election described Nawaz Sharif as the “front runner”, due to the perception he was the preferred candidate of the country's military, and the difficulties facing the PTI such as their candidates

⁹⁵ As above.

⁹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, [Instability in Pakistan](#), updated 10 August 2023, accessed 6 October 2023.

⁹⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies, Alexander Palmer & Mackenzie Holtz, “[The Islamic State Threat in Pakistan: Trends and Scenarios](#)”, 3 August 2023.

⁹⁸ “[Islamic State claims responsibility for bombings on eve of Pakistan election](#)”, The Guardian, 8 February 2024.

⁹⁹ “[12 Killed In 51 Terror Attacks On Election Day In Pakistan](#)”, NDTV World, 9 February 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Gallup, [PUBLIC PULSE REPORTS: Gallup Pakistan Political Weather Report: 1 month before the General Election 2024](#), 10 January 2024.

¹⁰¹ As above.

having to run as independents and the party unable to use its electoral symbol.¹⁰²

2.2

Results

Directly elected seats

The elections were held on 8 February 2024. In what most media outlets reported as a surprise result, independents aligned with the PTI party won the largest number of the 266 directly elected seats in the National Assembly. Of the directly elected seats independents won 101, 92 of those were aligned with the PTI.¹⁰³

The PML-N won 75 seats, the PPP 54, the Muttahida Qomi Movement Pakistan (MQM Pakistan) party won 17, and the rest (18) were won by smaller parties (the election of one of these seats was postponed).¹⁰⁴ No party therefore had sufficient seats to form a majority government on their own.

Both Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif were reported to have claimed victory after the first results were announced, though Mr Sharif acknowledged he would need to form a coalition government for his party to enter office.¹⁰⁵

BBC News reported that the head of Pakistan's armed forces, General Asim Munir, urged the country to leave "anarchy and polarisation behind", saying the politics of polarisation did "not suit a progressive country of 250 million people".¹⁰⁶

Suspension of mobile phone and data networks on election day

Pakistan's caretaker government suspended mobile phone and data networks on the election day. The interior ministry said this had been done to protect against terror attacks, saying in a statement that "precious lives have been lost" in recent militant attacks and such "security measures are essential to maintain the law and order situation and to deal with potential threats".¹⁰⁷

Dawn, the Pakistan newspaper, reported that some voters were left unable to reach or locate their polling stations due to being unable to rely on an

¹⁰² See "[Pakistan's former PM Sharif to launch election campaign as front-runner](#)", Reuters, 11 January 2024; "[Army looms large as Nawaz Sharif eases towards fourth term in Pakistan](#)", The Guardian 5 February 2024; and "[Pakistan on edge as old dynasties vie for power and populist Imran Khan languishes in prison](#)", CNN, 7 February 2024.

¹⁰³ "[As Pakistan's newly elected parliament meets, a look at the PM candidates](#)", Al Jazeera, 29 February 2024.

¹⁰⁴ The National Assembly, [General Elections 2024](#), accessed 20 March 2024.

¹⁰⁵ "[Pakistan army urges unity as ex-PMs both declare election win](#)", BBC News, 10 February 2024.

¹⁰⁶ As above.

¹⁰⁷ "[Mobile network suspension mars polls across country](#)", Dawn, 9 February 2024.

Election Commission text messaging service that confirms the polling station where people are registered to vote, and the unavailability of ride-hailing apps.¹⁰⁸

Services were suspended throughout the day, and only started being restored after 8pm. Prominent politicians such as Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, complained about the move, calling on the day for services to be restored. Ali Tahir of the PTI said the internet shutdown raised “serious doubts about the ECP’s commitment to fulfilling its constitutional duties”, and that “the pretexts provided by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority for these internet blackouts are both flimsy and inadequate”.¹⁰⁹

The Committee to Protect Journalists said the blackout had prevented journalists from reporting from polling stations and “severely undermine[d] citizens’ rights to stay informed”.¹¹⁰

Allocation of reserved seats

After the election attention quickly turned to the allocation of the 70 National Assembly reserved seats (60 are reserved for women and 10 for non-Muslims as set out in section 1.2), as this would determine which coalition of parties might be able to form the next government, and the durability of any coalition.

The [December 2023 decision](#) by the Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP) that the PTI having not held valid internal elections, meant that their candidates [had to stand as independents](#) (see Section 1.3), making them ineligible for the allocation of reserved seats, as these are calculated on the percentage of the vote gained by each party in each province.

On 19 February, the PTI announced that it would join the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) political party, in a bid to make them eligible for the reserved seats in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies’ elections. The Business Standard newspaper described the SIC as “right-wing” and “an alliance of Islamic political and religious parties ... which represents followers of the school of Sunni Islam”.¹¹¹ The SIC, while registered as a political party did not actually contest the National Assembly elections. According to Al Jazeera SIC’s leader, Sahibzada Hamid Raza, “chose to contest independently, winning his seat from Faisalabad city in Punjab province”.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ [“Mobile network suspension mars polls across country”](#), Dawn, 9 February 2024.

¹⁰⁹ As above.

¹¹⁰ As above.

¹¹¹ [“Independent candidates to join rightwing Sunni Ittehad Council: Imran’s PTI”](#), Business Standard, 20 February 2024.

¹¹² [“Why is Pakistan’s PTI fighting for reserved seats in parliament?”](#), Al Jazeera, 7 March 2024.

PTI chairman Gohar Khan, said the PTI had made a “formal agreement” with the SIC and it would submit to ECP a “request to allocate the reserved seats according to the party strength and under law”.¹¹³

On 4 March the ECP ruled that the SIC wasn’t eligible to claim its quota of the reserved seats, because according to Al Jazeera, the party had “failed to submit a party list for reserved candidates before the ECP’s deadline of February 22, two weeks after the February 8 election”.¹¹⁴ The news site explained the process further:

According to regulations, any political party contesting the polls must submit a list of their nominations for reserved seats prior to elections, as per the schedule given by the ECP. However, after the polls, if a party has over-performed and needs to submit additional names for reserved candidates, it has two weeks to do so.

Independents have three days after their win announcement to declare their affiliation with a party in the assembly.

The party they join gets a boost in the number of reserved seats it gets, commensurate with the number of independents that join it.¹¹⁵

The PTI/SIC filed legal claims to appeal the ECP ruling. On 14 March the Peshawar High Court “unanimously rejected” their petition.¹¹⁶ The PTI/SIC appealed this decision and on 1 March Pakistan’s Supreme Court began hearing legal arguments in the case.¹¹⁷

On 6 May a three-member bench of the Supreme Court suspended the Peshawar High Court ruling, accepted the PTI/SIC appeal, and as per the Government’s request referred the matter to the Supreme Court’s judicial committee, so a larger bench of the Supreme Court can consider the appeal.¹¹⁸ The case is expected to be heard next by the Supreme Court on the 3 June.¹¹⁹

If the PTI/SIC appeal was successful, and the Supreme Court ordered the reserved seats to be reallocated, the current Government coalition (see section 2.4) would likely lose its two-thirds majority but would still hold a simple majority in the National Assembly.¹²⁰

Provincial election results

Elections for Pakistan’s four provincial assemblies took place on the same day as the national elections. Like the National Assembly, the provincial

¹¹³ [“Independent candidates to join rightwing Sunni Ittehad Council: Imran's PTI”](#), Business Standard, 20 February 2024.

¹¹⁴ [“Why is Pakistan’s PTI fighting for reserved seats in parliament?”](#), Al Jazeera, 7 March 2024.

¹¹⁵ As above.

¹¹⁶ [“PHC 'unanimously' rejects SIC's reserved seats plea”](#), The International News, 14 March 2023.

¹¹⁷ [“SIC's reserved seats issue lands in SC”](#), The Express Tribune, 1 April 2024.

¹¹⁸ [“SC grants major relief to PTI on reserved seats issue”](#), The International News, 6 May 2024.

¹¹⁹ [“SC suspends PHC's seats allocation order”](#), The Express Tribune, 6 May 2024.

¹²⁰ [“Saga of reserved seats”](#), Dawn, 18 May 2024.

assemblies have a mixture of directly elected seats, and reserved seats for women and non-Muslims.

Only in Balochistan was there a change in the parties in control of the provincial assemblies. Incumbent parties remained in power in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

The decision by Pakistan's Election Commission that the PTI/SIC were ineligible for reserved seats in the National Assembly, also applied to the reserved seats in the provincial assemblies.¹²¹

In Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, the PML-N were once again the largest party, winning 217 of the 371 seats. The PTI/SIC were in second place with 107 seats.¹²² The PML-N have formed a coalition government with the IPP and PML-Q parties, and Maryam Nawaz, Nawaz Sharif's daughter, described as his "political heir", was elected Chief Minister by the Punjab assembly, becoming the first female Chief Minister of the province.¹²³

In Sindh, the PPP came first winning 117 of the 168 provincial assembly seats and will continue to lead a single-party government. MQM came second with 37 seats.¹²⁴

In KP the PTI/SIC came first with 87 seats, and another four independents joined them giving them a total of 91 of the 145 provincial assembly seats, meaning they will remain in government. The JUI came second with 18 seats.¹²⁵

In Balochistan, the Balochistan Awami Party which was previously the largest party and led a coalition government, lost heavily, going from 24 seats to just five. The PPP and PML-N both did well, the PML-N narrowly won the most seats with 18 out of the assembly's 65 total, the PPP were second with 17 seats. The PML-N and PPP have formed a coalition government with four other smaller parties.¹²⁶

2.3

Aftermath and protests, claims of vote rigging

In the days following the election, protests broke out as PTI supporters took to the streets alleging that there had been widespread vote rigging.¹²⁷ The Guardian reported that Imran Khan's party claimed that "the real number of

¹²¹ "[Why is Pakistan's PTI fighting for reserved seats in parliament?](#)", Al Jazeera, 7 March 2024.

¹²² Dunya News, [Elections 2024: Punjab](#), accessed 17 May 2024.

¹²³ "[Nawaz Sharif's daughter elected to head Pakistan's Punjab, seen as stepping stone](#)", Reuters, 26 February 2024.

¹²⁴ Dunya News, [Elections 2024: Sindh](#), accessed 17 May 2024.

¹²⁵ Dunya News, [Elections 2024: KP](#), accessed 17 May 2024.

¹²⁶ Dunya News, [Elections 2024: Balochistan](#), accessed 17 May 2024.

¹²⁷ "[Protests take place across Pakistan amid election vote-rigging allegations](#)", The Guardian, 12 February 2024.

seats it won was more than 150”, it had “alleged systematic fraud in the counting and recording of the votes”, and it was “challenging dozens of the results in the courts”.¹²⁸

Over 100 PTI leaders and workers were reportedly arrested in Lahore the capital of Punjab province during the protests, with the VOA news site reporting “The authorities have not yet explained the charges under which they arrested the protesters”.¹²⁹

The PTI were not alone in claiming electoral fraud. In the province of Balochistan, Jan Buledi of the National party claimed that “thousands of votes had been registered for PPP from polling stations that had been closed down due to a security threat”, and that “he had received a direct death threat from a colonel after publicly accusing the military of filling the ballot boxes with fake votes in the constituency where he was running”.¹³⁰

The Guardian quoted an unnamed security source responding to these claims as saying:

These allegations are totally baseless, frivolous and devoid of truth. As per the constitution of Pakistan and guidelines issued by the Election Commission of Pakistan, army and civil armed forces were employed to provide security duties as second and third tier forces. They had nothing to do with the balloting process on the polling day.¹³¹

International reaction

Following the elections, the UK, US, and EU governments all published statements expressing concerns with the electoral process.

The UK Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, commended all those who voted, but in what seemed to be a reference to Imran Khan and the PTI, spoke of concerns over party leaders not being able to participate, and parties being unable to use electoral symbols, as well as calling for Pakistan’s government to uphold human rights:

The UK and Pakistan enjoy a close and long-standing relationship, underpinned by strong links between our people. Following yesterday’s elections, we commend all those who voted.

We recognise, however, serious concerns raised about the fairness and lack of inclusivity of the elections. We regret that not all parties were formally permitted to contest the elections and that legal processes were used to prevent some political leaders from participation, and to prevent the use of recognisable party symbols. We also note the restrictions imposed on internet

¹²⁸ As above.

¹²⁹ “[Pakistani Police Crack Down on Khan Supporters During Alleged Vote Fraud Protest](#)”, VOA, 10 March 2024.

¹³⁰ “[Protests take place across Pakistan amid election vote-rigging allegations](#)”, The Guardian, 12 February 2024.

¹³¹ As above.

access on polling day, significant delays to the reporting of results and claims of irregularities in the counting process.

The UK urges authorities in Pakistan to uphold fundamental human rights including free access to information, and the rule of law. This includes the right to a fair trial, through adherence to due process and an independent and transparent judicial system, free from interference.

The election of a civilian government with the mandate to deliver crucial reforms is essential for Pakistan to flourish. The new government must be accountable to the people it serves, and work to represent the interests of all Pakistan's citizens and communities with equity and justice. We look forward to working with Pakistan's next government to achieve this, and across the range of our shared interests.¹³²

The US Department of State released a statement saying: “We join credible international and local election observers in their assessment that these elections included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly”. It said the US was “concerned about allegations of interference in the electoral process”, and that “claims of interference or fraud should be fully investigated”.¹³³

A statement by EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs said:

We regret the lack of a level playing field due to the inability of some political actors to contest the elections, restrictions to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression both online and offline, restrictions of access to the internet, as well as allegations of severe interference in the electoral process, including arrests of political activists.¹³⁴

It also called upon “the relevant authorities to ensure a timely and full investigation of all reported election irregularities and to implement the recommendations of the upcoming EU Election Expert Mission report”.¹³⁵

Pakistan's foreign ministry released its own statement in response to “statements from certain countries and organizations” on the elections, saying it was “surprised by the negative tone of some of these statements, which neither take into account the complexity of the electoral process, nor acknowledge the free and enthusiastic exercise of the right to vote by tens of millions of Pakistanis”. It also said that “Some statements are not even factual. There was no nationwide internet shutdown. Only mobile services were suspended for the day to avoid terrorist incidents on the polling day”.¹³⁶

¹³² Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [Press release: Pakistan elections 2024: Foreign Secretary's statement](#), 9 February 2024.

¹³³ US State Department, [Elections in Pakistan: Press Statement, Matthew Miller, Department Spokesperson](#), February 9, 2024

¹³⁴ Council of the European Union, [Pakistan: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the general elections](#), 9 February 2024.

¹³⁵ As above.

¹³⁶ Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Press releases: General Elections 2024](#), 10 February 2024.

Observer missions

The Commonwealth sent a mission to observe the elections. At the time of writing they have yet to publish a full report, but released an [interim statement](#) (PDF) on 10 February featuring some initial observations. They said they had “received reports of incidents of intimidation and even violence against candidates, members of the media and other citizens” and “also received reports of arrests and detentions, especially of supporters and members of a main political party”. The statement said that “Stakeholders expressed concerns” about the impact of the PTI being blocked from using their electoral symbol. It did not mention any problems with the counting of the votes themselves.¹³⁷

At the time of writing, the EU Election Mission Report on the election referenced above has yet to be published.

A Pakistan NGO, the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), conducted its own observation exercise, with its volunteers observing around 25% of polling stations. In a preliminary observation report, FAFEN found that voting and counting processes largely followed correct procedures, stating: “polling officials to be largely complying with the legally-prescribed processes of identification of incoming voters” and “ballot processing was found to be in compliance with legal standards at the majority of polling stations”.¹³⁸ However, the NGO also said that its observers were blocked from observing the voting process in 76 polling stations, and that returning officers in only about half of polling stations allowed them to witness the result tabulation proceedings.¹³⁹

The report also criticised the short time between the delimitation exercise which redrew the electoral constituencies and the election. It noted criticisms of the ECP’s decisions against the PTI, including the party being declared ineligible for reserved seats, but noted that the party’s “supported candidates won the largest number of seats”. However, it suggested that the “future Parliament may consider doing away with restrictive regulations on political parties and strengthening their role in the country’s electoral framework”, nothing further that “regardless of legal merit, actions against political parties and workers during the election period taint the credibility of the electoral process”.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ The Commonwealth, [Interim Statement: Commonwealth Observer Group to Pakistan’s 2024 General Election](#) (PDF), 10 February 2024.

¹³⁸ FAFEN, [Preliminary Election Observation Report of GE-2024](#) (PDF), 10 February 2024, p6.

¹³⁹ As above, pp 2-3.

¹⁴⁰ As above, pp 6-7.

2.4

New coalition government agreed

On the 13 February the PML-N and PPP announced plans to form a coalition once more to try to lead the next government of Pakistan. The PML-N also announced that Shehbaz Sharif, who led the government before the 2024 elections would be its candidate for Prime Minister, rather than his recently returned brother Nawaz Sharif.¹⁴¹

The PTI said its independent candidates would also try to form a government. However, the party's spokesperson Raoof Hasan said he had been mandated by Imran Khan "to approach all political parties other than the PPP, PMLN and MQM" to do so.¹⁴² An analysis by the Brookings think tank said this move by the PTI was "no surprise—Khan's populist politics relies on opposition to these two parties".¹⁴³

On 20 February, after several rounds of negotiations between the PML-N and the PPP,¹⁴⁴ the two parties said they had reached a formal coalition agreement, and as part of that they would both nominate Shehbaz Sharif of the PML-N as Prime Minister, and Asif Ali Zardari of the PPP as President.¹⁴⁵ Mr Sharif also held talks with smaller parties to persuade them to join the PML-N/PPP coalition.¹⁴⁶

In the run up to the election most news sources reported that Nawaz Sharif was likely to become Prime Minister if the PML-N regained power, so there was some surprise that he agreed to nominate his brother Shehbaz instead.¹⁴⁷ It is not clear why this happened. The News 18 website quoted unnamed sources that both Nawaz Sharif was "not keen" on becoming Prime Minister again, but also that "The establishment is also not comfortable with the idea of a Nawaz-led government due to his anti-army stand. The army feels Shehbaz Sharif will be a great chief executive for the government to deliver on expected lines".¹⁴⁸ However, this was not reported elsewhere.

Shehbaz Sharif becomes Prime Minister again

On 3 March the new National Assembly met to vote for a Prime Minister, votes from 169 members were required for a candidate to take office. Shehbaz Sharif won 201 votes becoming Prime Minister; Omar Ayub Khan backed by the

¹⁴¹ "[Pakistan: coalition agrees to form government and shut out Imran Khan's party](#)", The Guardian, 13 February 2024,

¹⁴² "[Pakistan election: PTI joins religious parties, PPP backs rival PMLN](#)", Al Jazeera, 13 February 2014

¹⁴³ Brookings, [Pakistan's surprising and marred 2024 election, and what comes next](#), 29 February 2024.

¹⁴⁴ "[Pakistan's majority parties struggle to form coalition government](#)", Reuters, 19 February 2024.

¹⁴⁵ "[Pakistan election: PMLN and PPP reach agreement on coalition government](#)", BBC News, 20 February 2024.

¹⁴⁶ "[PML-N negotiates terms with other parties](#)", Business Recorder, 22 February 2024.

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, [Nawaz Sharif Not To Be Pak PM Though Alliance Set To Cross Majority Mark](#), NDTV, 14 February 2024.

¹⁴⁸ "[Pakistan Elections: Nawaz Sharif Doesn't Want to be PM Now, Zardari Lobbying to Become President, Say Sources](#)", News 18, 11 February 2024.

PTI (but officially representing the SIC party) received 92 votes. Omar Ayub Khan has taken up the position of leader of the opposition. He is the grandson of General Ayub Khan, Pakistan's second President who seized power in a military coup.¹⁴⁹

Six other parties joined the PML-N/PPP coalition, Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q), Balochistan People's Party (BAP), Pakistan Muslim League-Zia (PML-Z), the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (Pakistan Stability Party, IPP), and the National Party (NP). The coalition at the time of the vote, had 205 of the National Assembly's 336 seats, but not all the reserved seats had been allocated by the ECP.¹⁵⁰

After being elected Mr Sharif outlined his government's policy proposals in a speech, stating that he and his coalition partners would steer the country "back to shore". Some of the policies include getting Pakistan out of its debt crisis, improving public transport, building new medical facilities, providing direct subsidies to farmers, providing specialised training to 500,000 young students, ending terrorism and its root causes, and setting a goal for Pakistan to become a member of G20 countries by 2030.¹⁵¹ He also vowed that those involved in the violence of 9 May 2023, when PTI supporters protesting the arrest of Imran Khan were involved in attacking military sites (see section 1.3), will not be forgiven and would be brought to justice.¹⁵²

During the meeting of the National Assembly, it was reported by the Guardian that the PTI/SIC members held up posters of Imran Khan, shouted "azadi", meaning freedom, called the new alliance government a "coalition of losers", and as Mr Sharif made his speech "there were shouts of "thief" from PTI ranks".¹⁵³

Final reserved seats allocated giving coalition two-thirds majority

At the time of the National Assembly vote for the new Prime Minister on 3 March, 23 reserved seats had still not been allocated by the ECP, and only 304 lawmakers had taken their oath and so were able to vote.¹⁵⁴

The ECP allocated the final reserved seats on 6 March after its ruling that the PTI/SIC were ineligible to take up reserved seats in the National Assembly, giving the final seat totals.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ "[Army brat to 'anti-establishment' face: Who is Pakistan's Omar Ayub Khan?](#)", Al Jazeera, 6 March 2024.

¹⁵⁰ "[Shehbaz poised for another term at helm](#)", Dawn, 3 March 2024.

¹⁵¹ "[Shehbaz Sharif elected prime minister for 2nd time, vows to steer Pakistan 'back to shore' in victory speech](#)", Dawn, 3 March 2024.

¹⁵² As above.

¹⁵³ "[Shehbaz Sharif elected as prime minister of Pakistan](#)", The Guardian, 3 March 2024.

¹⁵⁴ "[Shehbaz poised for another term at helm](#)", Dawn, 3 March 2024.

¹⁵⁵ "[PML-N gets lucky as reserved seats doled out](#)", Dawn, 6 March 2024.

The PML-N party became the largest in the National Assembly, with a total of 123 seats, out of the total 342 in the National Assembly. They were allocated 39 of the reserved seats (34 for women and five for non-Muslims), added to 75 directly elected seats, and nine independents who joined the party after the elections.

The PPP finished on 73 seats, 54 directly elected and 19 reserved (16 for women, 3 for non-Muslims), making them the third largest party after the PTI-backed independents.

In terms of the six other coalition parties, MQM-Pakistan gained five reserved seats, giving them 22 in total. PML-Q gained one reserved seat, giving them five in total. The IPP gained one reserved seat, giving them four in total. The PML-Z, BAP and NP all gained no reserved seats and have one general seat each. This gives the coalition 229 National Assembly seats, over the 224 required for a two-thirds majority.¹⁵⁶

A two-thirds majority in both the National Assembly and the Senate is required to pass amendments to the country's constitution. As set out in section 2.6, the most recent Senate elections held in late March/early April did not give the governing coalition a two-thirds majority in that chamber.

New Cabinet sworn in

Shehbaz Sharif's cabinet was sworn in on 19 March 2024. Despite being part of the coalition government, the PPP refused to be part of the federal cabinet unlike in its previous coalition.¹⁵⁷ An analysis by the Diplomat magazine suggested that the cabinet appointments showed the influence of the military, stating it "has been successful in placing its reliable people in important posts while assigning others to less significant ones".¹⁵⁸

2.5

PPP's Asif Ali Zardari elected President by parliament

On 9 March 2024, Asif Ali Zardari, co-chairperson of the PPP was elected as the new President, winning 411 votes. The PTI candidate Mehmood Khan Achakzai received 181 votes.¹⁵⁹ This will be Zardari's second term as President, he was first elected in 2008, the year after the assassination of his wife Benazir Bhutto.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ "[PML-N gets lucky as reserved seats doled out](#)", Dawn, 6 March 2024, and "[Ruling coalition secure two-third majority in national assembly](#)", Associated Press of Pakistan, 6 March 2024.

¹⁵⁷ "[Ishaq Dar becomes FM as PM Shehbaz's 19-member cabinet sworn in](#)", Dawn, 11 March 2024.

¹⁵⁸ "[Pakistan's New Cabinet Indicates Military's Influence](#)", The Diplomat, 13 March 2024.

¹⁵⁹ "[Asif Ali Zardari elected Pakistan's president for second time](#)", Al Jazeera, 9 March 2024.

¹⁶⁰ "[Outcry as Asif Ali Zardari is elected president of Pakistan](#)", The Guardian, 6 September 2008.

Presidents are elected by an electoral college formed of members of the National Assembly, Senate and the four provincial assemblies.

The President before the general election was Arif Alvi of the PTI party, who was first elected in 2018.¹⁶¹

As set out in section 1.2, the role of the President in Pakistan is largely ceremonial, with executive power exercised by the Prime Minister.¹⁶²

Despite these limited powers, President Zardari will be able to provide support to the new government, and according to the news organisation DW, Mr Zardari played a key role in talks to form the PML-N-PPP coalition.¹⁶³

2.6 Senate elections

As set out in section 1.2, the Senate is indirectly elected with 92 of the chamber's 96 seats elected by the members of the provincial assemblies (the four senators representing the Islamabad Capital Territory are elected by members of the National Assembly). Half of the membership is renewed every three years.

48 vacant seats were up for election in 2024. On 31 March, 18 candidates were elected unopposed as senators.¹⁶⁴

Dispute over the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province elections

Elections for the 30 remaining seats were due on 2 April.¹⁶⁵ However, elections for only 19 were held after Pakistan's Election Commission postponed the vote for the 11 seats from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. The Commission said the delay was due to members of the KP provincial assembly who won reserved seats having not yet taken their oaths of office. The PTI/SIC, who won the most seats in the KP provincial elections condemned the Commission's decision describing it in a statement as "poll robbery". They described the

¹⁶¹ As explained above Presidents in Pakistan are elected by members of the Parliament and provincial assemblies. If these institutions are dissolved when a Presidential term ends, then the President stays in office until after the general election, and an election must be held within thirty days of the election by the newly elected members. Zardari will not be able to seek election, as Presidents are limited to two terms of office. See Article 41 of the [Constitution of Pakistan](#) (PDF).

¹⁶² See Daily Pakistan, [What are the constitutional powers and duties of Pakistan's President?](#), 4 September 2018; and Pakistan National Assembly, [Constitution of Pakistan](#) (PDF), Articles 41-48, 75, 175, 232, and 243, accessed 19 March 2023.

¹⁶³ ["Pakistan: Zardari elected president for second time"](#), DW, 10 March 2024.

¹⁶⁴ ["18 elected as Senators unopposed ahead of polling"](#), The Nation, 31 March 2024.

¹⁶⁵ ["All set for Senate polls as 59 left in race for 30 seats"](#), Dawn, 31 March 2024.

decision as “merely a continuation of the same conspiracy under which the people’s mandate was stolen after recent general elections”.¹⁶⁶

The PTI/SIC Speaker of the KP provincial assembly has not allowed those members allocated reserved seats in the 2024 general election to take their oaths, as he and his party reject the decision by the Election Commission that the PTI/SIC was ineligible to receive reserved seats.¹⁶⁷ The party has filed legal petitions over the swearing in of the reserved seat members.¹⁶⁸ The PTI/SIC would have won a large proportion of the KP reserved seats, if eligible, having won the largest number of directly elected seats.

The PTI also decided to boycott the Sindh provincial assembly election for its Senate seats, again citing dissatisfaction with the results of February’s general election, and not being awarded reserved seats in the provincial elections.¹⁶⁹

Current allocation of Senate seats

After the voting on 2 April, and the candidates elected unopposed on 31 March, the party’s current strength in the Senate is as follows:

- **PPP:** 24 seats
- **PML-N:** 19 seats
- **PTI/SIC:** 18 seats
- **Independents:** 6 seats
- **BAP:** 4 seats
- **Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Pakistan** 4 seats
- **MQM:** 3 seats
- **Awami National Party:** 3 seats
- **Balochistan National Party:** 1 seat
- **MWMP** 1 seat
- **NP:** 1 seat

¹⁶⁶ “[Pakistan’s PTI slams poll body after Senate election delayed in a province](#)”, Al Jazeera, 3 April 2024.

¹⁶⁷ “[See KP Assembly secretariat says it hasn’t received govt orders to call oath-taking sitting](#)”, Dawn, 31 March 2024; and [CM KP says won’t allow oath-taking on reserved seats](#), The Nation, 2 April 2024.

¹⁶⁸ “[Results of elections on 30 Senate seats announced!](#)”, Samaa TV, 2 April 2024.

¹⁶⁹ “[PTI announces Senate election boycott in Sindh](#)”, Dawn, 1 April 2024.

- **Pakistan Muslim League:** 1 seat¹⁷⁰

At the time of writing, the remaining 11 seats for KP province remain unelected. Al Jazeera report that considering the PTI/SIC's strength in that assembly it would be expected to win "at least 10" of those seats, once elections take place. This would make it the largest party in the chamber.¹⁷¹

The current government coalition of the PML-N, PPP, MQM, PML-Q, BAP, PML-Z, IPP and NP parties, has a total of 51 seats, giving it a majority, but not the two-thirds majority which is needed to pass constitutional amendments.

¹⁷⁰ Senate of Pakistan, [Senators](#), accessed 2 May 2024.

¹⁷¹ "[Pakistan's PTI slams poll body after Senate election delayed in a province](#)", Al Jazeera, 3 April 2024.

3 What next for Pakistan?

3.1 Durability of the new government and the role of the military

Weakness of the governing coalition and strength of the military

An analysis by the US think tank Brookings argues that post-election the military got “the weak coalition government it wanted” in order to “better to control it”, and that the new government “will function as a junior partner to the military” stating that Shehbaz Sharif’s previous government “handed over unprecedented power to the army in 2023, and it is likely to continue to do so in this term as well”. It argues further that conduct of the election “has accentuated political tensions in the country”, and as a result the “incoming coalition government is likely to be unstable”, therefore undermining the view that military is “the guarantor of stability in Pakistan”.¹⁷²

Professor Ayesha Jalal of Tufts University writing for the Conversation website echoed this view saying: “a split national assembly and weak government plays into the military’s hands”.¹⁷³

While agreeing that the military continues to play a powerful role in the running of the country, an analysis by Marvin Weinbaum and Naad-e-Ali Sulehria of the Middle East Institute, written later than those above, states that the new government is much stronger than what was expected when the general election was first announced, suggesting that “the country’s mainstream political elites have reasserted themselves”.¹⁷⁴

The article concedes that the PML-N-led Government “has its vulnerabilities” and “can expect Khan’s loyalists to try to revive their movement through street power”. However, it judges that the new government in partnership with the military “has taken a series of strong steps designed to ensure political stability and gain the government a long lease in office”.¹⁷⁵ It points principally to the building of the new coalition government that now has a

¹⁷² Brookings, [Pakistan’s surprising and marred 2024 election, and what comes next](#), 29 February 2024.

¹⁷³ “[Pakistan’s post-election crisis – how anti-army vote may deliver an unstable government that falls into the military’s hands](#)”, The Conversation, 11 February 2024.

¹⁷⁴ Middle East Institute, [The establishment strikes back in Pakistan](#), 27 March 2024.

¹⁷⁵ As above.

two-thirds majority in the parliament. But it also suggests that the central government has plans to further consolidate its power including by:

- preparing to abolish the constitutional provision allowing for caretaker governments, giving the current administration more powers to affect the conduct of the next general elections;
- proposals to eliminate Pakistan’s National Accountability Bureau, its anti-corruption agency, which has in the past disqualified senior PML-N and PPP members from holding public office; and
- strengthening the powers of local government bodies but having their power come from the central government rather than provincial governments, giving Islamabad more control.¹⁷⁶

The role of the PTI

Both the Brookings and Conversation articles argue that tactics were employed to intimidate and suppress PTI supporters, but these appear to have failed, making what might happen next more uncertain. Though Professor Jalal states the fact that PTI was out of favour with the military and did so well in the election “suggests there was no straightforward rigging across the board”.¹⁷⁷

The PTI and its supporters are likely to still claim that the election was rigged, and to try and disrupt the work of the coalition government. The United States Institute for Peace expects that the party will attempt to do this “through street protests, court cases challenging the electoral results and inside the parliament with its sizable representation”, but also that “the military establishment may try to contain any PTI agitation and enable the coalition government to get down to the business of governing”.¹⁷⁸

How the PTI will continue to function with its leader Imran Khan in prison is uncertain. It doesn’t look likely that he will be successful in the short term at overturning his convictions, with the Economist magazine arguing “The reality is that if Mr Khan wishes to achieve political rehabilitation, he would probably require either General Munir’s [Head of the armed forces] blessing or a reconciliation pact with other major civilian parties. Neither seems likely”.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Middle East Institute, [The establishment strikes back in Pakistan](#), 27 March 2024.

¹⁷⁷ As above.

¹⁷⁸ United States Institute for Peace, [Understanding Pakistan’s Election Results](#), 13 February 2024.

¹⁷⁹ “[What next for Pakistan?](#)”, The Economist, 27 March 2024.

3.2

Economic, security, and foreign policy challenges

Economic and debt crisis

Historic issues

A combination of long-standing economic issues and the Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented inflation and energy shortages that sapped the popularity of Imran Khan's administration.¹⁸⁰ The devastating floods that hit Pakistan between June and October 2022 exacerbated the country's economic crisis further.¹⁸¹

In July 2023, the IMF and Pakistan's Government agreed a new bailout programme worth \$3 billion,¹⁸² (Pakistan has received 23 funding schemes from the IMF since 1958).¹⁸³ To receive the funding Pakistan was required by the IMF to take several policy steps, such as its central bank raising its interest rate, raising tax revenues, and reforming its energy sector, including reversing fuel subsidies.¹⁸⁴

The latest IMF bailout programme was necessary in part because of what the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) describes as Pakistan's "massive external debt obligations".¹⁸⁵ The repayments required on this debt over the next several years are considerable, according to the USIP: "From April 2023 to June 2026, Pakistan needs to repay \$77.5 billion in external debt".¹⁸⁶ Pakistan's estimated tax revenue in the financial year 2023-24 is only around £32 billion.¹⁸⁷

New Government actions

In March 2024, Shehbaz Sharif's new government secured agreement from the IMF for the release of \$1.1bn, the final tranche of the \$3bn bailout.¹⁸⁸

The Government will now need to secure a fresh funding deal with the IMF and started negotiations in May 2024. Sharif's administration has reportedly

¹⁸⁰ See Atlantic Council, [Experts react: Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan cuts fuel and electricity prices](#), 28 February 2022; and "[Will Pakistan's Inflation Crisis Bring Down Imran Khan?](#)", Foreign Policy, 25 March 2022.

¹⁸¹ See "[How floods add to Pakistan's economic woes](#)", DW, 24 September 2022; and [For Pakistan flood victims, crises collide to fuel growing hunger](#), The New Humanitarian, 19 September 2023.

¹⁸² "[Will Pakistan's IMF agreement save its economy?](#)", Al Jazeera, 14 July 2023.

¹⁸³ IMF, [Pakistan: History of Lending Commitments as of February 29, 2020](#), accessed 26 April 2024.

¹⁸⁴ "[Pakistan, IMF reach \\$3bn staff-level agreement](#)", Al Jazeera, 30 June 2023.

¹⁸⁵ USIP, Shahbaz Rana, [Pakistan's Existential Economic Crisis](#), 6 April 2023.

¹⁸⁶ As above.

¹⁸⁷ East Asia Forum, [Breaking Pakistan's bad IMF habit](#), 25 August 2023.

¹⁸⁸ "[Pakistan, IMF reach staff-level deal to release \\$1.1bn from bailout package](#)", Al Jazeera, 20 March 2024.

emphasised it wants a bigger and longer-term programme.¹⁸⁹ As with previous bailouts, the IMF will require Pakistan to make potentially unpopular policy decisions to raise tax revenues and reduce spending. According to the Pakistan newspaper Dawn, it is likely that Pakistan will be required to make a “fiscal adjustment of at least 1.5pc of GDP” and this “would have to be made in the coming budget through a combination of additional revenue measures coupled with expenditure rationalisation and privatisation”.¹⁹⁰

Pakistan may also try to seek alternative forms of financing from its traditional allies: China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.¹⁹¹ However, according to an analysis by the think tank Chatham House, China and the UAE “are said to be unwilling to offer fresh assistance unless Pakistan demonstrates more resolve in implementing structural reforms of its own”.¹⁹² In early April, Shehbaz Sharif made a two-day visit to Saudi Arabia, his first official trip abroad, during which the Saudis reiterated an earlier pledge to invest \$5 billion in Pakistan.¹⁹³

An analysis by Brookings, suggests that Pakistan’s new government might struggle to implement necessary economic changes, stating “neither of the coalition parties [the PML-N and PPP] has a sound record of economic prudence or growth. The army is now also directly involved in the economy, via the army chief’s membership on a special investment facilitation council”.¹⁹⁴

Security and terrorism

While terrorism is a long-standing issue in Pakistan, the country has been experiencing an upsurge in terrorist violence over the last few years, as explained by the US-based think tank the Stimson Center:

Since 2022, Pakistan has confronted a persistent spike in terror attacks. Militant and terror attacks increased by 69 percent, peaking in 2023, the highest they’ve been since 2017. While various groups ranging from religious extremists to ethno-nationalist separatists conducted terror attacks during 2023, three groups alone mounted over 82 percent of these attacks: Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ [“IMF, Islamabad open talks for a new loan, says Pakistan finance ministry”, Reuters, 13 May 2024.](#)

¹⁹⁰ [“Talks begin with IMF on new bailout”, Dawn, 14 May 2024.](#)

¹⁹¹ See: Middle East Institute, [Evolving Middle Eastern imperatives on the Indo-Pakistan rivalry](#), 30 April 2024; and Chatham House, [Has Pakistan’s new coalition government been handed a poisoned chalice?](#), 22 February 2024.

¹⁹² Chatham House, [Has Pakistan’s new coalition government been handed a poisoned chalice?](#), 22 February 2024.

¹⁹³ Middle East Institute, [Evolving Middle Eastern imperatives on the Indo-Pakistan rivalry](#), 30 April 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Brookings, [Pakistan’s surprising and marred 2024 election, and what comes next](#), 29 February 2024.

¹⁹⁵ Stimson Center, [Political Cooperation Can Stem the Resurgent Threat of Militancy in Pakistan](#), 2 April 2024.

The violence has been particularly concentrated in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces that neighbour Afghanistan. The relationship between the federal government led by Shehbaz Sharif in Islamabad and the two provincial governments will complicate efforts to find solutions to the violence according to an analysis by Dr Farzana Shaikh at Chatham House:

[S]ecuring the cooperation of provincial governments, each likely to be headed by different parties, will be far from easy. In KP, where a majority of PTI-backed independent candidates hostile to a PML-led coalition is set to take power, problems could intensify if – as when last in office – pro-PTI ministers pursue a peace agreement with the TTP. As prime minister, Khan was known to be partial to the TTP, incurring the wrath of Pakistan’s military establishment.¹⁹⁶

The Stimson Center concurs with this analysis, saying that both Pakistan’s international and external stability “will largely depend on whether the federal and provincial governments can reach a consensus on multiple policy issues despite electoral divisions, most crucially counterterrorism”.¹⁹⁷

Two high-profile terrorist attacks took place in the weeks following the formation of Pakistan’s new government. On 16 March 2024, seven Pakistani soldiers were killed in a terrorist attack in the North Waziristan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province near the Afghan border, by a newly formed militant group, Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad.¹⁹⁸ On 20 March the Balochistan Liberation Army killed over 25 members of Pakistan’s armed forces after targeting military installations in Gwadar Port.¹⁹⁹

Foreign policy

The analysis of Pakistan’s new government by Chatham House states that the “range and complexity” of the domestic challenges facing it “means that the new government could be forced to delay vital foreign policy decisions, including managing tense relations with Afghanistan and Iran”.²⁰⁰ The think tank also forecasted that the government would be unlikely to realise the goal of prioritising ties with India, as set out by Nawaz Sharif during the election.

However, Chatham House did suggest that the new government would likely “reinforce existing ties with China” and to “try and mend fences with Saudi

¹⁹⁶ Chatham House, [Has Pakistan’s new coalition government been handed a poisoned chalice?](#), 22 February 2024.

¹⁹⁷ Stimson Center, [Political Cooperation Can Stem the Resurgent Threat of Militancy in Pakistan](#), 2 April 2024.

¹⁹⁸ “[7 soldiers killed in a suicide truck bombing and shootout in northwest Pakistan](#)”, AP News, 16 March 2024.

¹⁹⁹ “[Gwadar Attack Kills Over 25 Pakistani Forces Personnel, Fight Militants, Says BLA](#)” The Balochistan Post, 21 March 2024

²⁰⁰ Chatham House, [Has Pakistan’s new coalition government been handed a poisoned chalice?](#), 22 February 2024.

Arabia and the United States, after relations with both countries came under strain during Khan's tenure as Prime Minister".²⁰¹

The Diplomat magazine, in article looking at the future of India-Pakistan relations, also stated it was unlikely that these would improve soon, saying "given the existing hostility between the two countries, rapprochement remains a distant possibility" and "instead, a tense standoff between New Delhi and Islamabad will likely continue to undermine the peace and stability of South Asia".²⁰²

Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions and airstrikes

Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan are high, linked to the issue of terrorist groups based in the former country. As described in the previous section seven Pakistani soldiers were killed in a terrorist attack near the Afghan border. Pakistan President, Asif Ali Zardari, vowed to retaliate, and on 18 March, Pakistan's military conducted air strikes within Afghanistan killing eight people, as part of what it called "intelligence-based anti-terrorist operations".²⁰³ In a statement, Pakistan's Foreign Office said the "prime targets of the operation" were "terrorists belonging to the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group", but it also mentioned the role of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in multiple terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. The statement said further that, over the years:

Pakistan has repeatedly conveyed its serious concerns to the interim Afghan government over the presence of terror outfits, including TTP, inside Afghanistan. These terrorists pose a grave threat to Pakistan's security and have consistently used Afghan territory to launch terror attacks inside Pakistani territory.²⁰⁴

In a statement a Taliban Government spokesperson condemned Pakistan's military strike, saying:

The Islamic Emirate strongly condemns the attacks and describes these as non-serious actions and violation of Afghanistani territory.

[...] Pakistan should not blame Afghanistan for their problems and failure to control violent incidents. Such acts can lead to dire consequences which will not be in control of Pakistan.²⁰⁵

According to the Middle East Institute, Kabul denies Pakistan's accusations that it is "acting as the TTP's patron, and also using the TTP to serve as a proxy force", insisting it is "firmly committed to refusing the use of Afghan territory as a staging ground for terrorist attacks against other countries", as well as "frequently den[ying] the TTP's presence in Afghanistan as a cross-

²⁰¹ As above.

²⁰² "[Strategic Choices: Will Pakistan-India Normalize Relations in 2024?](#)", The Diplomat, 29 April 2024.

²⁰³ "[Pakistan carried out intelligence-based anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan](#)", FO confirms Dawn, 18 March 2024.

²⁰⁴ As above.

²⁰⁵ "[Pakistan carried out intelligence-based anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan](#)", FO confirms, Dawn, 18 March 2024.

border terrorist organization”.²⁰⁶ The Institute states “there seems little likelihood of a near-term improvement in bilateral relations” and “discussions by the two countries over establishing a joint counter-terrorism approach have gone nowhere”.²⁰⁷

The Middle East Institute, in another piece of analysis, has also suggested that Shehbaz Sharif’s indication he will approve a large increase to the country’s military budget and their backing of the institution “could help explain the Army’s more aggressive moves against the Afghanistan-based terrorist group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in recent weeks as well as its tougher stance toward Kabul”.²⁰⁸

Another aspect of worsening relations between the two countries, has been the recent mass expulsion of Afghans from Pakistan. In October 2023 Pakistan’s caretaker government ordered all illegal immigrants to leave the country by 1 November or face deportation. It cited the alleged involvement of Afghans in terrorist attacks in Pakistan, as part of the reason for the move. Since 1 November, Pakistan has been detaining large numbers of undocumented Afghans and then transporting them direct to the border.

For more, see Commons Library briefing [Expulsion of Afghans from Pakistan and Iran](#), 8 December 2023.

²⁰⁶ Middle East Institute, [Monday Briefing: US and Israel both leave key questions unanswered in the Gaza war: Pakistan and Afghanistan at swords’ points](#), Marvin G. Weinbaum, March 25, 2024

²⁰⁷ As above.

²⁰⁸ Middle East Institute, [The establishment strikes back in Pakistan](#), 27 March 2024.

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