

The general elections in Pakistan: results and context, the military and the IMF, coming stakes

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The general elections held in Pakistan on 8 February resulted in a split vote, with no party obtaining a clear majority at national level. The vote concerned the 266 seats in the National Assembly, as well as the four provincial assemblies of Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The overall turn out was nearly 48 percent of total 128,585,760 registered votes. The vote was split between several right-wing parties, reflecting a significant change in Pakistan's political dynamics. The results indicate that voters have punished the policies of the IMF and the repression carried out by the state, under the leadership of the army.

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The official results of the parliamentary elections

In this country of 241 million inhabitants (128 millions of whom are on the electoral roll), 5,121 candidates stood for election - 312 of them women - most of them representing 167 political parties (44 of them "national").

Results for the National Assembly

PML-N. The Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), a centrist right-wing party, enjoyed the support of the military establishment, but it failed to win over the electorate. It won only 75 seats, which nevertheless means that its parliamentary group is the largest compared with that of the other recognized parties, thanks to the fact that Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf was not allowed to run under its banner and take part in the official campaign.

Tehreek Insaaf. The Electoral Commission of Pakistan has taken numerous measures to make Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PTI) "invisible". The party was not allowed to run under its name and its "de facto" candidates were not allowed to use its electoral symbol: a cricket bat (Imran Khan is a former world cricket champion!). In a country where 75% of the population is illiterate, the visual aspect of electoral symbols plays a major role in identifying candidates. The PTI was unable to take part in the official campaign. As for Imran Khan, who was facing many police cases registered against him, was the subject of three more politically

motivated convictions in the week leading up to the general election and was in detention, as were many other PTI leaders.

Despite all these obstacles, the PTI was able to run and support numerous “independent” candidates who used social networks to make themselves known. They were a real success. As a result, 102 “independents” were elected, the vast majority of whom (92) are identified with the Tehreek Insaaf.

The PPP. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) won 54 seats.

The religious political parties suffered setbacks in these elections, with only the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam making notable gains (4 elected). The Tehreek Labeek obtained 5 to 7% of the vote in each constituency (none elected), while the Jamaat-e-Islami’s independent campaign did not produce any significant results (none elected).

A word of explanation regarding the overall distribution of seats in the National Assembly. Only 266 of the 336 seats are directly elected. The remaining 70 seats are “reserved” for women (60 seats) or non-Muslim minorities (10 seats). Only recognized parties can benefit from these reservations, in proportion to their results. Independent candidates are not entitled to them. So, PTI “independents” have joined Sunni Ittehad Council (a Sunni registered political party) to qualify for the reserved seats

Corruption and fraud. The elections were marred by widespread corruption, with all the major political parties spending exorbitant sums to buy votes. The open sale of votes for up to 5,000 rupees (\$18) further undermined the democratic process. Election campaigns failed to address substantive issues, with the PTI focusing on the conviction of Imran Khan, the PML-N rallying around the slogan “Give Pakistan to Nawaz” and the PPP presenting Bilawal Bhutto as a national savior.

During the election, the Ministry of the Interior temporarily blocked access to the Internet in the name of maintaining law and order (attacks had taken place in the previous days), which meant that many voters in urban centers were unable to book taxis or organize their families to go and vote. Accusations of electoral fraud abound. 28 people were killed on the day. During the vote count, when the lead of the pro-PTI “independent” candidates became apparent, the vote count was suspended, fuelling suspicions that massive fraud had been orchestrated by the military.

We can therefore only speak of the *official* results of the polls.

The provincial assemblies

The PML-N retained its majority in the Punjab assembly. The PPP won a large victory in the Sindh assembly. The Balochistan assembly saw a split vote between several nationalist and federal parties. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the “independent” candidates supported by the PTI dominated.

A dual rejection of the IMF and state repression

The overall election result expresses a rejection of the IMF’s policies, which have led to unprecedented price rises in Pakistan. They also represent a clear repudiation of those responsible for implementing them, those responsible for inflation and the repressive policies that accompany it, in particular the conservative government of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM, a coalition), which came to power in April 2022.

In August 2023, a caretaker cabinet was appointed to prepare for elections, which should have been held three months later, in November. They were unconstitutionally delayed until February 2024, in

order to redraw electoral constituencies. The aim was clearly to favor the Muslim League-N.

More specifically, the electoral result shows strong opposition to the crackdown on the PTI led by Imran Khan. This perceived victimization of the imprisoned Imran Khan mobilized the electorate against Mian Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League. Sharif had been Prime Minister three times in the past. He went into exile in the United Kingdom to escape prosecution. The end of his self-exile, accompanied by the swift dismissal of all legal cases against him, clearly indicates his return to favor in the eyes of the army. On the strength of this new collusion, the military establishment strategically orchestrated the Muslim League-N's election campaign. Its failure is therefore a serious setback.

However, the election result also highlights the dominance of right-wing ideologies, although the vote lacked fervor and was mainly a reaction to internal right-wing conflicts rather than a clear division between left and right. It was not a "principled" anti-establishment vote, with the PTI's anti-establishment stance proving to be circumstantial, temporary and selective in its opposition to the oppression exercised by the state apparatus (the party is far from defending all the victims of state repression!).

The left marginalized

Although the left did participate to some extent in the electoral battle, its influence was limited, with fewer than 40 candidates running.

The left suffered from the popularity of Tehreek Insaaf, with most of the votes against the military establishment and IMF policies going to the PTI. Left-wing candidates, including those from the Haqooq Khalq Party, the Awami Workers Party and the Brabri Party, failed to win significant support or seats. Notably, a National Assembly seat held by Marxist Ali Wazir in the 2018 general election was lost this time around.

Haqooq Khalq Party candidates, Ammar Jan got 3% of the total votes cast (i.e. 1573) in his constituency, Imtiaz Alam and Muzammil got one percent.

Ali Wazir had been elected to national parliament from the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during 2018 general elections, he was the only Marxist parliamentarian sitting in the National Assembly. He lost his seat, receiving 16,000 votes, while the winner obtained 21,000.

Despite this setback, parties such as Haqooq Khalq have promised to continue to step up their mobilization. Haqooq Khalq's main field of work is organizing workers and peasants. However, it has decided to continue its electoral activities. It plans to present more than a hundred candidates in the next parliamentary elections and to participate fully in the various local elections.

Parliamentary negotiations

The election of the next Prime Minister shows that it is too early to rejoice. The outcome of the parliamentary negotiations could well turn out in favor of the military.

Nawaz Sharif's PML-N and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's PPP have reached an agreement to form a government, negotiating power-sharing. It also hopes to co-opt some of the candidates backed by Imran Khan's PTI, with some success.

Nawaz Sharif is not applying for the post of Prime Minister: he prefers to take a back seat to his brother Shahbaz Sharif. Nawaz has a lot of baggage behind him (some of it very recent) and choose not to be too exposed. His brother was also head of government several times, but in a more distant past. Nawaz can rule from behind the scene.

The parliamentary majority is fragile, which is not necessarily to the displeasure of the military, who are keeping a tight grip. No civilian Prime Minister has ever completed a legislature in Pakistan – a fate also common in presidential regimes (see France), but less so in parliamentary ones.

Authoritarian neoliberalism

Although the elections of 8 February were a powerful expression of deep popular discontent, they do not herald any positive change in the measures that will be implemented. The Nawaz brothers, the PLM-N and the government are set to deepen neo-liberal policies, continue privatizing state institutions and further exploit the working classes in the name of debt repayment.

The government will accede to the demands of the IMF and the World Bank (except when they ask that the rich be taxed too, to help pay down the debt). It will give priority to the interests of business over the well-being of the population. The rise of agribusiness, facilitated by the PML-N and the interim governments, is likely to exacerbate economic inequalities even further and will not address the needs of small farmers.

The rising cost of living is affecting the most essential goods for the working classes, such as vegetables, wheat, sugar and electricity, which have become unaffordable. The rate of extreme poverty continues to rise. Young people are seeking salvation in emigration (for those who have the means to attempt the adventure), even in high-risk host countries. Remittances from migrants to their families are no more enough to offset the high cost of living crisis. In the background, the climate-ecological crises and health crisis (including, but not limited to, Covid) that have occurred in recent years in Pakistan have considerably weakened the social fabric, plunging more families and villages into extreme poverty.

This catastrophic situation has given rise to major protests, such as in September 2023, against electricity price rises. Unfortunately, the conditions are not currently ripe for them to consolidate their foothold, establish themselves over the long term, build up their strength and link up with each other.

It is up to the forces of the left to get involved with progressive, social and gender movements, to help set in motion a positive dynamic that will enable organizations to be strengthened in favor of the working class, women, small farmers and ordinary people.

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P.S.

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