

*Event Transcript*

**Understanding Pakistan's Post-Election Environment**

The Stimson Center

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*Featuring:*

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*Event Description*

Two years after Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted in a no-confidence vote in April 2022, Pakistan held elections on February 8, 2024. Pakistanis, however, came out and voted in significant numbers for independent candidates, most of whom were previously affiliated with the PTI. For the first time in Pakistan's history, independents won the most seats in Parliament, even as the final tally remains disputed.

In this panel discussion, three experts on Pakistan's domestic politics explored key dynamics that define the nature of competition among Pakistan's political parties. As part of this conversation, we are especially pleased to highlight a new book by Stimson South Asia program's Non-Resident Fellow Niloufer Siddiqui, titled *Under the Gun: Political Parties and Violence in Pakistan*, which explores why and how political parties in Pakistan turn to violence. Panelists discussed the election turnout, gender dynamics, and what economic troubles mean for Pakistan's foreign policy going forward.

*More information and event video available at:* <https://www.stimson.org/event/understanding-pakistans-post-election-environment/>

*Event Transcript*

Sahar Khan: Good morning to everyone joining us from the United States, and good evening to all those joining us from South Asia. My name is Sahar Khan, and I am a Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center in Washington D.C.

Last week, Pakistanis voted in a highly anticipated election. The country's most popular leader, former Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or PTI, remains jailed and was banned from running. Over the past few months, we have seen the military establishment crackdown on PTI politicians and supporters, and many analysts believe

that this would mean a low voter turnout. However, on Thursday, February 8, Pakistanis came out and voted, creating a surprising result. For the first time in Pakistan's troubled political history, independent candidates secured the most seats in parliament. These independent candidates are affiliated with PTI. On Sunday, the election commission of Pakistan announced that they won 102 seats out of 336. The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) party (PMLN) headed by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, came in second with 75 seats. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 54 seats. What does this all mean?

To help us understand Pakistan's post-election environment, we are joined by Dr. Niloufer Siddiqui. She is an Assistant Professor of political science at the State University of New York in Albany, a Non-resident Fellow of the South Asia program, and author of "[Under the Gun, Political Parties and Violence in Pakistan](#)."

Also joining us this morning are Dr. Sara Khan, who is an Assistant Professor of political science at Yale University, and Dr. Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, who is an Associate Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad.

Niloufer, I would like to start with you. You have a timely new book out which explores dynamics within, and among, political parties in Pakistan, including coalition building and political violence. What insights can you share from your research to help us understand what is playing out in Pakistan's post-election environment?

Niloufer Siddiqui: Thank you so much, Sahar. Thanks for the introduction. I am really happy to be here to talk about the recent elections in Pakistan and also highlight my book in the process. First, I wanted to acknowledge that the results from last week surprised me in many ways. I am still trying to make sense of what they mean for Pakistan's partisan politics and civil-military relations both today, and in the future.

As such, my comments today will be a bit more exploratory than I might have initially imagined or predicted. Having said that, I wanted to focus on a few key areas, all of which highlight some key takeaways from my book, albeit indirectly. First, I think it is worth discussing what these results from Thursday mean for party voter linkages and the nature of party support. This is a key independent variable in my book that I argue helps explain party strategy more broadly.

We saw voters cast their vote for PTI-affiliated candidates at a relatively large-scale last week. This is despite the fact that the party was unable to campaign effectively, that its election symbol was taken away, and that its leader was in jail. All of this is truly remarkable and should make us stop

and think about what we know about political and voting behavior in the country.

To be clear, we are not able to distinguish between whether the vote was effectively pro-PTI in nature or whether it was an anti-incumbent vote. This is an important point that I will come back to because we cannot, or should not, under-emphasize the economic situation in which the elections took place. Thirdly, there is the question of whether this was really a symbolic anti-military vote. I am sure there was a combination of all three of these at play. However, I wanted to focus briefly on the portion of the vote that was pro-PTI in order to try and make sense of this phenomenon.

For a long time, scholars of Pakistani politics, but also Pakistani political parties themselves, have taken for granted that much of Pakistan's citizenry is mired in patron-client relations. They rely on local elites or electables to win seats for the party or base their vote choice on their kinship group or Baradari, and in doing so, lack autonomy over their own vote. Many parties continue to believe that votes can be bought. They also believe that bringing on the right elite as a candidate will make up for the party's lack of a clear mandate or policy, inability to perform, or inability to invest in direct linkages with voters. The PTI, too, has relied on these traditional forms of voter mobilization, relying heavily on electables despite their stated mandate to the contrary.

However, I think what these elections have brought into sharp focus is that while the role of electables has remarkable staying power, especially in certain parts of the country, these traditional power dynamics are also starting to feel pressure. In particular, we have seen the role of the local elite change as urbanization severs the economic link with feudals, as well as the increasing Islamist influence in some areas challenges Baradari ties. There is considerable evidence, at least since 2018, and probably even earlier, that the average voter in Pakistan appears to desire change as well as some form of true representation.

Along with urbanization has come other necessary changes, particularly the central role that political machines have had to play in transmitting information about citizens' preferences up the ladder to party leadership. Perhaps this is all due to an overall younger vote bank. Famously, 44% of Pakistan's voters are between the ages of 18 and 35, and there is also the ubiquitous presence and use of social media.

Whatever the case, we are really starting to see the limits of some older and persistent explanations of voting behavior in the country. Along with this continued reliance on electables, the PTI also successfully chose to simultaneously invest in rhetoric, craft a narrative and ideology, and make inroads in various populations using various technologies. Their

performance points to the fact that in order to succeed in today's Pakistan, you really need to pursue both of these strategies. To be certain, the PMLN and its coalition partners were incumbents in a truly desperate economic situation. In any other environment we would have expected them to lose.

While there is no counterfactual for us to observe, many believe, myself included, that had the 2022 vote of no confidence never happened, Imran Khan would have himself likely faced defeat if elections had been held on schedule. However, especially given that, it is all the more striking to me that the PMLN took its presumed win in this election for granted. It paid no attention to what is clearly a growing ideological movement against dynasties and the status quo. It is a movement that is desiring of economic growth and the PMLN offered no economic plan.

Whether we believe it or not, Khan's continued focus on anti-corruption as his party mandate, also helps provide some economic rationale for choosing his party. It is very simple. Do not choose a corrupt leader and we will not have an economic crisis.

Therefore, to summarize this long-winded point, we are seeing important changes in the relative autonomy of an individual voter in making demands of politicians and electoral candidates. By extension, this has meant that voters are showing some autonomy vis-a-vis the military and its supposed desires, which is a huge silver lining of the events of February 8.

Onto the second point, while I have suggested that there is evidence that PTI's voters are starting to feel real links to the party in many places, it is also clear that the PTI still relies heavily on local electables and does so in part to compensate for its weak party organizational structure, which is the other key variable that my work highlights. This is an important reminder for us that unfortunately, the PTI is not an actor on whom one can pin their democratic dreams and aspirations.

In particular, where a party is organizationally weak, which is the case for most parties in Pakistan, we find that they frequently have to make decisions which might not always be ideologically congruent with their state and mandate, but which are nonetheless necessary for purposes of vote gain. This means that the party often cannot fully commit to an ideology or mandate because much of its character is defined by the candidates that it has running for it.

To give just one example, the Pakistan People's Party, or PPP, has leadership that employs center-left rhetoric and is perhaps the most overtly pro-minority, pro-sectarian minority and pro-religious minority of most

parties. However, for long time it had contest, on its behalf, an individual who was known for forced conversions of Hindu girls in Sindh. Thus, there was a clear ideological divide between its stated mandate and the type of candidate on who represented it in parliament.

The other thing that a weak organizational structure means is that candidates are more likely to switch parties between elections, which makes the party more susceptible to pressure by institutions such as the military. In the last day or two, we have already seen one PTI-affiliated independent switch over to the PMLN.

Third, a weak organizational party structure allows for dynastic families to remain at the helm. These dynastic parties, mean that the parties are concerned often only with short-term strategic gain. While Imran Khan himself may not be a dynastic actor, we have already seen reports that the PTI's choice for the chief minister of KP is a man that embodies many of the characteristics that the PTI is supposedly standing against.

To be clear, the causal arrow is complicated. Parties are weakly organized because the military has historically intervened in Pakistan, but their lack of organizational strength means that the military can continue doing so without facing significant pushback. In this context, parties have had to enter into explicit and implicit arrangements with the military for decades. Here we find that the PTI is not fundamentally different in its core functioning from other political parties. Thus, while the PTI is very effective at oppositional politics, when it comes to actual governance in office, we saw much of the same between 2018 and 2022, and we would expect that in the future as well.

What all of this means, is that I believe we should be prepared for a fair amount of instability going forward. Unfortunately, I think this is likely to include violence. We saw a fair amount of violence already leading up to the election, which included an armed militant attack on a PTI rally in Balochistan. An ANP (Awami National Party) leader was gunned down. There were armed clashes between the PPP and MQM (Muttahida Qaumi Movement) supporters in Karachi. On election day itself, nine people were killed. There have been reports since the February 8 elections that the state has responded with violence, allegedly in an attack against Mohsin Dawar, as well as in firings towards nonviolent PTI protesters.

In general, studies demonstrate that we can expect greater violence where citizens are more polarized. Given the likely inability of the parties to reach an agreement with one another, we are in for a rough and tumultuous next few weeks and months. I will end on that note. Thank you.

Sahar Khan:

Thank you so much, Niloufer, for that summary and for your analysis. I would like to switch over to Sarah Khan. Sarah, can you tell me a little bit about the dynamics that we have seen on the ground? Exit polls have indicated that more women came out to vote in this election. Anecdotally, we have heard quite a lot about the youth in this election as well.

Generally, younger voters were predicted to stay home this time around. From 2013 to 2018, we saw a reduction in voter turnout. While we are still figuring out the voter turnout numbers now, does this align with your understanding of how young people vote and also how women vote?

Sarah Khan:

Thank you so much, Sahar, and thanks for convening this panel. Luckily, we have turnout numbers from the constituencies where results have been reported, which is now most of them, even though we are still waiting on some of the results for constituencies that are pending.

Overall, turnout in this election was 48% which was down from 51% in 2018, which was down from 55% in 2013. There is a slight drop, but it is not a massive drop, which is something that is surprising given the environment in which this election took place. We would expect that the broad perception and narrative around the election being a foregone conclusion would lead voters to be apathetic and stay home.

Thus, this is something that is surprising. It shows that voters were mobilized and motivated despite the environment. Here, it is also important to think about party strategy and mobilization. The regional variation in turnout helps us understand this a little bit.

The turnout in Punjab is down to 52%, whereas it was 57% in 2018. There are some constituencies where we saw turnout as high as more than 60% in 2018. If we look at KP, however, the turnout has remained relatively stable. If anything, there is a slight increase of 42%. It is 42% in the 2024 elections, up from 41% in 2018. Again, we see this type of stability. Unsurprisingly, in Balochistan, given the environment, we have seen a vast reduction in turnout down from 42% to 35% in these elections. In Sindh, we see turnout down from 48% to 44%.

There are a few things to think about. One is, whether the PTI was especially successful in mobilizing turnout. I think that is a part of the story. Additionally, there is the question of whether the PMLN complacent about mobilizing their base. The reduction in the Punjab turnout numbers would suggest that this is indeed part of the story.

Unfortunately, Pakistan does not have great exit polls, which makes it difficult to say things conclusively about the composition of this turnout. What we do have data on, however, is the gender-disaggregated turnout.

Even though we saw positive anecdotes and visuals of women turning out to vote, and they certainly did, this was not in higher numbers than in 2018 or 2013. The gender gap in voter turnout has actually remained stable at nine percentage points between 2018 to 2024. In 2024, turnout has been 52% among men and 43% among women.

I would say that this is the part of the turnout story that I am absolutely not surprised by, because in order for women's turnout to increase, we need to see political parties making a concerted effort to mobilize women voters and reach out to them. This is one area where no party has changed its approach or strategy over the past few elections. In the surveys that we have done on the elections, women are consistently less likely to report that they are being reached out to by party workers or having contact with party activists. In a sense, parties are leaving non-mobilized votes on the table in their failure to do this. In several cases and constituencies, the margin of victory is smaller than the gender gap in voter turnout. This means parties have something to gain by mobilizing women voters, but they are simply failing to do so.

When it comes to the youth, it is a little harder because we do not have these numbers disaggregated by age in terms of the official turnout numbers. Furthermore, in the absence of great exit polls, it is hard to make statements right now about the youth voter turnout. However, this is, in part, a composition story and also a story of PMLN's failure to mobilize turnout overall and to turn out the youth vote.

Sahar Khan:

Thank you so much, Sarah. That was really helpful. For our online audience, if you have any questions, please put them in the chat, and I will make sure to ask them. Before I actually turn to you, I would like to turn to Farhan Siddiqi.

Farhan, as political parties currently try to form a coalition, and "wheel and deal", can you talk a little bit about the impact this election has on Pakistan's foreign policy and economic policy?

Farhan Siddiqi:

Thank you, Sahar. Thank you for having me. It is absolutely brilliant to be a part of this panel. There are three key areas or challenges that the new political dispensation has to contend with in terms of foreign and security policy. The first relates to tailoring Pakistan's foreign policy in order to achieve intended economic growth in development. Niloufer spoke about how anti-incumbency sentiments were a reflection of how Pakistan's economy has fared under the PDM (Pakistan Democratic Movement).

I remember when the PTI government was in power and the Pakistani economy started to show serious weaknesses. A lot of the arguments were attributed to the fact that it was a new party and that these were

inexperienced politicians. We need experienced politicians, for example, from the PMLN or other parties, to put the economy in a correct direction. However, under the PDM government, the Pakistani economy just tanked. The GDP growth rate was at 1% and the manufacturing production rate was in the negatives. Inflation today in Pakistan is very high. The most important policy initiative for the new political dispensation would be tailoring its foreign policy to achieve economic growth and development. The unfortunate part about it is that none of these political parties, whether it is the PTI, the PMLN, or PPP, are willing to have a conversation about the deep structural reforms that are needed in order to put the economy forward. In terms of our elites, there is a simple, casual, and lazy reliance on foreign investments. For example, these can come through CPEC. Likewise, in recent months, there was some news about a new investment agreement that has been made with the GCC countries.

If you look at the PTI, PMLN and PPP manifestos, you will find huge concerns about geoeconomics being the way forward and the need center it. However, there are huge challenges regarding whether those deep structural economic reforms can be undertaken by the new government. The second important challenge is with respect to regional policy or foreign policy in the neighborhood. It was good to see Nawaz Sharif, in his so-called victory speech, speak about the fact that we do not only need peace within the country, but also with our neighbors. However, since this new government will be a weak government, in that it will be a coalition government, it will not have the large numbers required to take important policy decisions with respect to India.

The most important element with respect to regional policy in India is the military itself. It is the most important veto player. The signs here are not encouraging. About two weeks before the elections took place, the chief of army staff had a meeting with university students and he categorically ruled out any reconciliation with India. He said, "We cannot have normalization with a country which has not reconciled itself up until now with the concept of Pakistan."

On Afghanistan, he was equally categorical and said that the life of a single Pakistani is more important than the whole of Afghanistan. Thus, regarding the foreign policy or the regional policy in the neighborhood, there are important challenges there. That is also linked to the domestic security situation, especially in Balochistan, because foreign and domestic policy cannot be seen in isolation from each other.

Balochistan is at a tipping point. We have seen what happened with the recent protest in Islamabad. The protest over enforced disappearances, for example, are still continuing in Balochistan. The Gwadar-Turbat Highway has been blocked for the last 10 days by these protestors. A week before



the elections, Baloch separatists carried out 63 attacks across the province in a matter of days. On the day of the elections, there were 10 to 15 explosions in Gwadar itself.

The point that I am trying to make is that the political and military elites in Pakistan today, blame all of this on Pakistan's enemies, whether they are in India, Afghanistan, or Iran. As long as these policy elites continue to blame Pakistan's domestic security woes onto external agents or external enemies, we will not find the momentum for peace. This is despite the rhetoric, on the part of political elites and leaders, that this is what we want to achieve. Thus, that will be a challenge.

The final important challenge for the new political government would be to hedge or navigate between the United States and China. One area where a lot of momentum will be seen, and which the government will direct its efforts towards, is reinvigorating CPEC. Both the People's Party and the PMLN have their claimed to be the ones that brought CPEC into the country. The political elite in this country know that there is no easy money out there which can be gained from Saudi Arabia, UAE, or other places. Thus, the imperative for them is to strengthen these ties with China, have geoeconomics as their goal, and then oversee the overturn of Pakistan's economic situation.

Then there is the United States as well. With respect to the U.S., if you read the manifestos of all three parties, especially the People's Party and PMLN manifesto, there is this realization that minimal engagements with the U.S. is the future of bilateral relations between both countries. The era of enduring strategic alliances is over. I believe the government will try to continue to engage with the U.S. through trade, investments, education, people-to-people exchanges, clean energy, and environmental collaboration. It is likely to also try to satisfy the U.S. and show them that whatever Pakistan does with China does not come at the expense of American interests in the South Asian region. Thank you.

Sahar Khan:

Thank you so much, Farhan. That was also really insightful. Usually, as the moderator, I get to ask the first question, so I'm going to take advantage of this. Being based in Washington DC, one thing that we were all paying attention to was the results of the election. Many analysts did not predict the results that ended up happening. In your view, and this is a question for all three of you, what did we get wrong here in Washington? Niloufer, do you want to start?

Niloufer Siddiqui:

Sure. I would add that I do not think it is just Washington that got it wrong. I have spoken with many people who were on a scale of surprise to entirely shocked by what happened.

My sense is that a part of it was a failure to take the Pakistani citizen seriously and recognize that people were going to go vote their intention. This manifested in the voter turnout, which was not very high by modern western standards, but still higher than we might have predicted. Regarding a lot of the other ways in which the PTI received votes than people might have predicted, the concerted campaign against the people in the weeks and months prior to the election would have made a difference in how people voted.

The final point, and this is just reiterating Sarah's point, is that the other non-PTI political parties also took the establishment's backing for granted. They probably assumed that the lack of level playing field that had been created in their favor meant that they did not need to reach out to voters to either get them to turn out in the midst of this economic crisis, as Farhan said, or show that they had some economic plan for stability.

Sahar Khan: Thank you. Anyone else? Sarah, Farhan, any thoughts?

Sarah Khan: Sure. I agree with everything Niloufer said. To that, I would say that all too often, the primary frame for analyzing Pakistan politics, and rightly so, is civil-military relations. If you thought about the results of the elections from that perspective, there was certainly a perception of a foregone conclusion. We failed to take seriously both the Pakistani voters and also the parties' mobilization strategies. What we have seen in terms of turnout is that with parties' mobilization strategies, both their success and failure to mobilize their base really matters. That is an important factor in thinking about the results of the election.

Sahar Khan: Thank you, Sarah. Keeping that in mind, I have a few questions from our audience about voter turnout, voter behavior, and patterns. One of them is that given the disparity between economic indicators and voting patterns, particularly for PTI and PMLN, why do people appear to ignore poor performance while casting their ballots? In other words, what kinds of issues are really important to them when they are voting? I will leave it here and then I will ask my other question. Any takers?

Farhan Siddiqi: Yeah, so there was widespread sympathy for Imran Khan, for the persecution that came to the party (PTI) in the last year or so. Sarah rightly spoke about the civil-military relations side of it. And I think this time around, the PTI voters were really mobilized in the sense that the social media machinery was very active, and they were able to mobilize the voters. I think this time round, economic conditions also played a key role. So you can speak about the populist wave in the country, you can speak about the sympathy for Imran Khan, and all of that is completely true and correct, but the economic conditions in the country are such that for the PMLN and the other parties, one of the reasons they did not campaign the

way that campaigns usually happen in this country, is that they did not have anything to offer to the public based on their 16 months performance with the PDM government.

So, I think the anti-incumbency that manifested with the performance of the PDM government, I think was also a key factor in the way that the election results turned out.

Niloufer Siddiqui: If I could just add to that, which I agree with. I also think that, in a way, the economic aspect of the election was the least surprising because we should have expected an anti-incumbent effect. And that is effectively what we saw. And then I think if you look at the survey data from right before the vote of no confidence, it was becoming really apparent that Imran Khan was starting to lose popular support. And I think one major reason he was starting to lose popular support was because of the economy.

What the vote of no confidence did was it basically shifted the blame of the economy onto the PDM. And then as Farhan rightly said, the PDM also did not magically do anything positive with the economy as many might have expected, and in fact, the economy grew progressively worse. So I do actually think that in this case, the voters are very rational and they are placing the blame of the economy on the person or the party that is in power at the moment.

If we are to ask the voter to try and understand long-term macroeconomic performance and be like, "Well, this party took this decision six years ago and we're going to see the effects." Or the floods happened. I barely understand some of those issues so I don't think that that is something that we can expect of the average voter. But I do not think that that means that the voter isn't being rational or putting the blame where we would expect the blame to fall.

Sarah Khan: Let me add to that that we see this pattern of voters punishing for poor performance, but I think that the tragedy is that we do not see a concerted debate about the alternative policies among parties to improve this. That is not part of the discourse. So, we might not see the counterfactual of rewarding for the promise of better performance because all parties make this promise without connecting it to actual policy measures or being concrete. Parties very strategically avoid getting into the details of the connection between policy and performance. So it is no surprise that voters are also lacking in making those connections because parties are strategically avoiding it themselves.

Sahar Khan: That is an excellent point, Sarah. And I think what all three of you have basically alluded to is this idea that the Pakistani voter has agency, but this

is agency that we've been missing or we haven't given as much importance to. So with these election results in mind and how exactly the coalition will unfold and Pakistan's economic problems, I have a question for all three of you about Imran Khan's popularity.

Now he does remain Pakistan's most popular leader, but he remains imprisoned. So my question is really, in your view, what does this election and how the independents have secured more seats, what does this mean for PTI's evolution? And also in your view, how will the military establishment deal with PTI's victory? If I can put it in quotation marks. I'd love to hear from all three of you about the internal institutional weaknesses or capacities that we're seeing in that regard. And I'll let Sarah go first.

Sarah Khan:

This is an interesting juncture for the PTI, which has seen transformations at different points in time. The biggest one being in the lead up to the 2018 elections, which in terms of its internal organization and candidates started to look like other parties. There's an understanding that to come to national power, it is hard to do so without some appeasement of the military or some backing of the military, which was definitely the case in 2018, even though that, of course, changed. In terms of candidates, they are drawing on this pool of electable candidates rather than the strategy of building grassroots leadership.

This switch of the PTI happened between 2008 and 2018, I would say. I think it is in an interesting position because this is a party where arguably some of the voters at least are attached to leadership and ideological narratives that the PTI has really projected, also in the lead up to the elections. Many of the candidates are long-term independent electable candidates. There is a disconnect between the narrative and the scepter of Imran Khan's leadership that has mobilized voters, and the actual people who have won office affiliated with the PTI.

This was a question for the PTI in 2018, and it remains one – how to resolve this disconnect between the mobilizing narrative and the candidate selection that is necessary to gain this national level victory?

Niloufer Siddiqui:

If I could just add to that, I am not fully convinced how much this analogy or metaphor compares and holds, but I think about how the PPP, when it was first created in 1967, had this promise of being a cadre based, local level, a strongly organized political party that also eventually fell to the wayside in terms of relying on feudals and electables at very high numbers, which diluted both its ideology, which was initially more leftist, as well as its party cadre based organization.

There are some parallels to be drawn here with the way in which the PTI first came into being in the 1990s and had this promise of being so distinct from the other political parties and was focused on the cadres themselves and how that has gradually lost space. As the PTI has seen that it is successful in becoming more like the other mainstream political parties, in other words, more weekly organized, more reliant on the elites, it seems less and less likely to me that it is going to then invest in these strong organizational strategies.

The only way in which I do think that it is that we might see a move away from these other tried and tested methods of winning elections is if the voters hold, and the PTI supporters hold the party to account. The only way in which these voters and supporters are going to hold the party to account is if we let the party complete its term in office and hold elections on schedule, and then voters can vote their intention.

Without that, it is really hard in this very muddled environment to know what is happening and how much the PTI can be held to account versus something else. In this situation then, Imran Khan has no incentive to change either his role in the political party or think more about creating an internally democratic local based party. I am not particularly optimistic in seeing this evolution within the PTI in the short term, perhaps in the medium to long term.

Farhan Siddiqi:

How has the PTI evolved? I think what the PTI has done, and this is a trend in Pakistani politics that has never happened before, is to deepen the resentment against the military in Punjab, which is the seat of political, military, and bureaucratic power in the country. This is a train that started in 2017 when the Panama judgment came against Nawaz Sharif, and he came out in the open, naming and shaming military generals. At that time, it became a joke. "Mujhe kyun hataya? (*Why did you remove me?*)"

A lot of PTI voters and a lot of people affiliated with the PTI would talk to them, and they would tell you that the military is the only institution that has held the country together. It is wrong of Nawaz Sharif to blame the military for its interference in political processes.

What has happened in the last year or so is that resentment against the military and Imran Khan's speeches against the Chief of Army Staff and other individuals has deepened the resentment, the alienation, the respect even, and the legitimacy even of the military within the predominant province, Punjab. So, the reputational costs to the military have increased appreciably. That too in Punjab, which is unprecedented in Pakistan's political history.

Sahar Khan: Thank you for all of your comments. I want to switch over to Afghanistan. I have a question here from the audience, which is: Could any of you comment on how the elected government in Pakistan, once it is determined, of course, will react to 1000s of Afghan refugees that are currently residing in Pakistan after the US withdrawal in July 2021? Do we see this new government also embarking on a policy of deportation? The second part of this question has to do with the new government's potential relationship with the Taliban. In your view, is the new government going to interact with the Taliban in the same way that the caretaker government has, or will it be slightly different? If so, how would you envision that to be? Farhan, can I start with you?

Farhan Siddiqi: One of the key policy problems, whether foreign or domestic in Pakistan, is that decisions are very ad hoc. Policy decisions do not endure. We had this policy measure about Afghan refugees and illegal Afghan refugees, and they had to be deported back.

Soon after they were overshadowed by the protest by the Baloch Islamabad. The entire discourse shifted from the Afghans to the Baloch. Then we spoke about cross-border terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and how the TTP and other groups were being harbored by the Taliban government. Then the Iranian missile strikes took place. Then Afghanistan was completely overshadowed by Iran.

With the new government, the thinking at the top, as I said during my earlier comments, is to see a lot of domestic security and problems in Pakistan as a result of external involvement. The external involvement argument, given the fact that the new political coalition would be hard-pressed to bring the economic development growth and prosperity that is needed to put the country on the right track, will continue. The rhetoric with respect to Afghanistan, the Afghan refugees, and how Afghanistan is exporting terrorism into Pakistan, will be how politics will run under the new government.

Sahar Khan: I have a question here that is a little bit in the weeds, and that might require one of you to explain Form 45 and Form 47 but considering the discussions that we've had about voter dynamics and voter agency, our audience would benefit from hearing this question and hearing your answer.

What is your comment on various candidates who were declared winners in light of votes cited in Form 47, which was in contrast to the ones reported in Form 45 as they decided to concede defeat in favor of their contenders? How do you interpret this political behavior on the part of politicians who are stereotypically perceived as opportunists and corrupt?

Before you answer the question, if one of you are so brave enough to explain what Form 45 and Form 47 are for some of our audience members who may not be familiar, that would be great.

Sarah Khan:

I am happy to explain the forms. Form 45 is a polling station-level return. It is the statement of results at the polling station level. It includes the number of voters that were registered at that polling station number, the turnout, disaggregated by gender, the number of ballots that were rejected, and then the number of ballots that were cast for each of the contesting candidates.

These are supposed to be by 2:00 AM following the close of polls. They are delivered from the election staff at the polling station to the returning officer who was compiling the results.

Form 47 is a compilation at the constituency level of all of the polling station level results, and so the final results on Form 47 are what is used by the Election Commission to say this is the returned candidate from the constituency.

The controversy that is happening right now is that at the point of compilation from Form 45 to Form 47, there have been irregularities. Numbers have been changed from the original Form 45s, and those are not the numbers reflected in the compiled Form 47s. Right now, what is being made available by the Election Commission is Form 47s, the compiled results.

They are also required to make Form 45s available, and those are available for the 2018 elections. But the election commission itself has not yet made them available. However, candidates and polling agents of parties, have access to the Form 45s, and the officer is supposed to display them visibly at the polling station before they pass them on for compilation.

So certainly, the PTI, in particular, is making publicly available Form 45s that they have access to make the case that there are these discrepancies. I would say that the delay in the announcement of results by the Election Commission certainly lends credibility to the story that the compilation was not done in a timely and transparent fashion.

The independent watchdog, The Free and Fair Elections Network, which deployed more than 5,000 observers in this election, has also said that in about half of the constituencies that they were observing, they were denied access to the compilation of the Form 47 process. There's certainly a lack of transparency here, and that is the basis on which a number of candidates are petitioning against the results as announced in the Form 47s.

Niloufer Siddiqui: In terms of the second half of that question, about what it means that some of these candidates are coming out and saying that, like today the Jamaat-i-Islami candidate from Karachi said that he does not believe that he won the seat. It is striking. This is the thing about the election. There are lots of these small moments that are quite unprecedented, as we like to say, for what's happening in Pakistan nowadays.

For me, two things are important here. One is Sarah's point, which gets at the fact that the narrative has been lost about the transparency of these elections because of the decisions that were made and delaying results and so on. A little bit also that the media very quickly started to share results based on only 5% to 7% voter turnout, which also created this sense very early on that the PTI-affiliated independents were leading by very large numbers.

And then, following some of the acts or decisions made by the ECP, has created a sense that the PTI has very much won the public narrative in terms of their suggestion that very large numbers of seats have been rigged. But the fact that party members or candidates of other political parties are also joining the chorus here is a very positive sign of the fact that individuals are just protesting for the sake of a transparent democratic process, which is not something I think that we might have expected going in. That itself is a positive development that we should also think about.

Sahar Khan: Keeping that in mind, I have a question here about religious political parties. In the 2018 election, we saw an increase in support for the TLP. This time around, I would love to hear from all of you about religious sentiment and religious nationalism. What role has that played in this election? Is it declining or increasing, or how is it manifesting itself as political parties are trying to form a coalition?

Farhan Siddiqi: The TLP was the main surprise actor in the last elections, with 2.1 million votes. Their number has gone up slightly, which is now 2.6 million. In the last elections, they were able to win two provincial assembly seats, and I do not think they have won any seats this time, and the same goes for the other religious parties in Pakistan.

In that sense, religious nationalism was not exactly the slogan that motivated the individuals to come out to vote in Pakistan, and in that sense, the key takeaway for the 2024 elections. Previously, religious parties have never had the kind of support in Pakistan in terms of winning seats except for the 2002 elections when the MMA won a sizable number of seats in the elections. For the religious parties, in essence, they were defeated and they did not win a sizable number of votes. They were not able to make any impact in terms of the voters.



Again, the populist sympathetic wave for the PTI and the economic conditions were the main motivators for the voters to come out to vote for them. The same goes for nationalist parties, although the way the elections were conducted was very quickly. Some of them were winning in Balochistan, but when the results came out in the morning, they lost the elections. With respect to the ethnic parties, 15 seats for the MQM in Karachi, meaning that is again part of the irregularities that took place on the night of the elections because the other parties had a sizable number of votes. I was in Karachi at the time, and the electoral momentum was not with the MQM. It was contested between the Jamaat-e-Islami and the PTI. A lot of these results that we are now trying to analyze with respect to religious parties, and most, I think, with the nationalist parties, the irregularities that Sarah referred to earlier, make a more composite, serious, balanced, nuanced analysis much more difficult.

Niloufer Siddiqui: To add to that, the numbers that Farhan cited are important here because even though the popular vote did not translate to seats for the TLP, it is not like we have seen a major dip in the number of people who turned out to vote for the TLP.

Just like in 2018, when we over-exaggerated the popular support that the TLP received on the basis of these two seats, I feel like initial coverage is already over-emphasizing a radical move away from religious support, and we have seen a consistent trend over the years. Obviously, the TLP phenomenon is concerning because of a supposed real link to vigilante violence, so I am not trying to say that it is not an important phenomenon. We need to put it within the broader patterns and trends of support for religious parties and religious movements more broadly in Pakistan, which have always been fairly consistent.

Sarah Khan: I would add that even when these parties do not win a seat in a constituency, they can get a significant share of the vote such that they can act as a spoiler for another party. And so absent winning seats, they may still have electoral influence.

Sahar Khan: One thing that I have also been paying close attention to is, as things have been unfolding, is Pakistan's overarching civil-military relationship. I think it is fair to say that the military establishment has always interfered in elections. This time around, more and more cases are being filed by candidates considering interference and rigging.

I had a question for you and a few other people in the audience also had a question about the military's role in Pakistan's politics. What does this election really mean? Will this give the military establishment pause to reflect? What does this mean about the establishment itself? What is your analysis of how the military, institutionally and internally, might want to

reflect on these election results and the agency of the Pakistani voter?  
Niloufer, I can start with you.

Niloufer Siddiqui: Obviously, this is the big question and the hardest one to answer. It is very difficult to predict where the military will go from here. That it has been very clear since after the events of April 2022. There is a strong public move that is contesting the role of the military in politics in Pakistan, and that has increasingly come on the streets. Now we have seen it take place at the polling booth to some extent as well. I think the questions that lie ahead for the military include recognition and, as you put it, a self-reflection on what that means in terms of giving the voter the agency that they deserve versus what it means for the relationship that they can now manage, either with Imran Khan and bringing him back into the fold or whether they put their eggs within the former PDM basket once again.

Here we have actually so many different moving parts because the political parties themselves, all of them, to varying extents, have room for leverage and negotiations to receive what they can, whether that means the prime minister position, whether that means something else. I am not generally very good at predictions, and certainly, on this issue, I do not think I would be able to have a good sense of where the military will fall. How things unfold in the next couple of days will give us a better sense.

Sarah Khan: I want to pick up on something that Farhan had raised earlier, which was this increasing public sentiment against the military. This is something huge that the military has to contend with because if there is one trend that we have seen in survey data and public opinion polls, it is that in the past few decades, the military has been the institution that enjoys the largest levels of public support, well above political parties, well above the police and the judiciary. And so what we're seeing now, at least behaviorally, is a challenge to this perception of the military enjoying those levels of public trust.

This is also something that is a challenge for political parties that, in some ways, know that they need some level of military backing for survival, especially to survive in government. It is one thing to win an election, and it is another thing to survive in government.

Now, parties also have to contend with this idea that, on the one hand, this is a hybrid regime, and survival in some ways depends on the military, and they have a voter base that is rejecting that. The way that parties also navigate this disconnect is going to be really important in this whole dynamic.

Farhan Siddiqi: To quickly add, one of the positive things about Pakistan's political development post-2008 is that voter identification with political parties

and with political leaders has increased tremendously. On the other side, when it comes to the military, it has decreased appreciably. There is increased resentment against the military, which is not seen as an institution of stability but as a spoiler in the political process. This sentiment in Pakistan with the recent elections, will only increase in the coming weeks and months.

Sahar Khan:

Thank you all for sharing your insights and your analysis with us. As Pakistan forms a coalition, I think everybody is waiting to see what happens in the end. Pakistan, as many of you know and many of our audience members know, is going through a poly-crisis where we are seeing a political crisis, and an economic crisis, and Pakistan has some very serious foreign policy challenges.

I wanted to thank all three of you for joining us this morning, sharing your thoughts and insights, and helping us unpack this political environment. One thing about always following Pakistan and studying Pakistan is that it is very hard to predict what's going to happen, so things are never dull, and this is no exception, but it is still really nice to see a successful election being conducted. Hopefully, this will have some positive outcomes for the country and its millions of people. Thank you all very much for joining us this morning.