

The Politics of the February 8, 2024, General Elections: A Brief Report

As expected, the 12th general elections held on February 8, 2024, were massively rigged by the military, and delivered a hung parliament.

Earlier, Pakistan's 12th general elections were held on February 8, 2024. The National Assembly, the lower house of Pakistan's bicameral parliament has 266 general seats, with another 70 reserved for women and minorities. A party or coalition needs 169 seats to form a government. About 60.6 million Pakistanis came out to vote in the elections and it recorded a low turnout with only 47.9pc of total eligible voters exercising their right to vote.

Out of the 266 directly elected seats in Parliament the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's affiliated independent candidates won 93 seats. Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) won 75 seats; the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) came third with 54 seats. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQMP) came fourth with 17 seats, JUI-F won four seats, PML-Q secured victory in three constituencies, while IPP and Balochistan National Party (BNP) won two seats each. The Majlis Wahdat ul Muslimeen (MWM), National Party (NP), PML-Z, Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP), and Pakhtunkhwa National Awami Party (PNAP) have won one seat each.¹

The VOA reported on February 15, 2024, that the vote was for change and that it was:²

primarily aimed toward the military establishment, which has a history of manipulating Pakistan's political landscape. Both Sharif and Khan have accused the top brass of forcing them out of office...As results came in after a delay of nearly 15 hours amid widespread allegations of rigging, Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir issued a statement calling on all to "move on from the politics of anarchy and polarization.

The PTI quickly alleged that it was deprived of a far greater mandate by widespread rigging and the manipulation of results, with its current leader Gohar Ali Khan suggesting they have evidence showing that the PTI won at least 180 seats out of 266 that were voted for. Protests continue across Pakistan, with PTI and several other parties claiming their mandates were stolen. Pakistan's interim government has rejected international calls to investigate allegations of rigging, saying the electoral process was a sovereign internal affair.³

In its report, the Free and Fair Election Network, or FAFEN, an Islamabad observer group, said:⁴ "Many election officials failed to follow rules or make necessary arrangements to gather results promptly. More than a dozen people have died in postelection violence."

The newly elected parliament will be sworn in in the next two weeks. The house will then elect its leader, who will serve as the prime minister. With Khan so far refusing to build an alliance with Zardari's PPP, the latter has agreed to throw his weight behind a coalition government led by PMLN. Analysts say that a minority government with no legitimacy will not survive for an exceptionally long time, despite the backing of the establishment.⁵

Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir issued a statement calling on all to "move on from the politics of anarchy and polarization."⁶ The outcome of the election was surprising because, over the past

months, the PTI has been almost decapitated by the military. It was effectively banned from contesting the general election after its cricket bat symbol, used on ballots to identify candidates, was removed and party members' speeches were barred from airing on television. PTI members instead stood as independent candidates.

Imran Khan was brought to power in 2018 with the blessing of the military. He was removed from power when he fell out with the military and went on to wage a risky campaign of defiance against it.

Khan has been behind bars since August 2023 and has been slapped with lengthy sentences for corruption, treason, and illegal marriage. Khan was ousted as prime minister in a parliamentary vote of no confidence, after which several criminal charges were laid against him. He was jailed on various charges a week before the election. Khan has said the legal cases against him were fabricated and part of a wider political witch-hunt.⁷ These charges were designed to keep him from power. In these elections, Khan's candidates were forced to run as independents. However, surprisingly candidates backed by his PTI emerged as the single largest bloc in the election result.

Earlier, the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) released a review report on voter turnout for the February 2024 Pakistani elections, revealing a decrease compared to 2018. However, the report also highlights a positive trend: a narrowing gender gap in voters.

According to FAFEN's analysis of Form 47 data from 264 National Assembly constituencies, approximately 47.6% of registered voters cast their ballots in 2024, compared to 52.1% in 2018. This represents a decrease of about 4.5%.

While the highest turnout was seen in Tharparkar (70.9%), South Waziristan registered the lowest at 16.3%. Interestingly, Islamabad, which had a turnout of 58.3% in 2018, saw a significant dip to 54.2% this year.⁸

The report also highlights the increase in registered voters, from 100.6 million in 2018 to 120.86 million in 2024. However, despite this growth, the overall voting percentage dropped.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experienced the biggest drop in turnout, falling from 44% to 39.5%. Punjab and Sindh also saw declines, dropping from 56.8% to 51.6% and 47.2% to 43.7% respectively. Balochistan's turnout remained stable, going from 45.3% to 42.9%.⁹

Despite the overall decrease in turnout, the report paints a positive picture of women's participation. FAFEN commends the significant improvement in female voter engagement, with no constituency recording less than 10% turnout from women in 2024. This represents a significant increase compared to 2018.

However, the report also acknowledges the persistent gender gap. While the turnout of male voters was 55.6% in the analyzed constituencies, it was only 45.6% for women. This highlights the need for further efforts to encourage women's political participation.¹⁰

There had occurred a shutdown of cellular and internet services on election day and after. As expected, there was widespread criticism for the alleged rigging and manipulation of the election results by the military. Pakistan finds itself in crisis again. Despite lacking the numbers to form a government, Imran Khan declared victory from prison, and his supporters took to the streets and went to court to protest. The PTI made claims of wide-scale poll rigging.¹¹

It has been many alleged that Pakistan's all-powerful military army has rigged the elections against Imran Khan. In several constituencies, the official vote tally differs wildly from the total arrived at by adding up

numbers from individual polling stations. Both the US and the European Union have called for an investigation into allegations of interference in the electoral process. Pakistan's caretaker prime minister called the elections "free and fair."¹²

In the elections, the independent candidates backed by PTI surged to early leads. However, the results announced were visibly worse for PTI. Many allege that Pakistan's army rigged things against Imran Khan. In several constituencies, the official vote total is quite different from the total arrived at by tallying numbers from each polling station. Both the US and the European Union called for an investigation into allegations of interference in the elections. However, Pakistan's caretaker prime minister called the elections free and fair.¹³

There was now political tension in the country as the PTI was staging nationwide protests about the alleged rigging. Resultantly, the country descended into political uncertainty. Pakistan's sovereign dollar bonds fell as much as 1.2 cents with the 2024 bond standing at 95.89 cents in the aftermath of the contentious election.¹⁴ It was feared that political uncertainty could exacerbate economic instability.¹⁵

Earlier, Nawaz Sharif's party staked a claim to lead a coalition government.¹⁶

On February 13, 2024, led by the PMLN and PPP announced the formation of a coalition government that will have more than 150 members in the parliament.¹⁷ The contentious parliamentary election is now mired in controversy.¹⁸

Pakistan's media regulators have blocked the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, with users across the country on February 22, 2024, enduring the sixth day of sweeping disruptions, and partial and complete shutdowns. Human rights activists have demanded a full restoration of internet services and access to social media. Washington has also urged Pakistan to lift restrictions on X.¹⁹

The outage was first observed over the weekend when the political party of Pakistan's imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan announced protests against what it says were rigged Feb. 8 parliamentary elections.

In the vote, candidates backed by Khan, who was barred from running, won most seats but were short of a simple majority needed to form a government. Social media platforms are often used by protest organizers to call followers out to the streets and spread the word about planned demonstrations.²⁰

Pakistan has witnessed an increase in political instability since the balloting. The country's elections oversight body denies charges by Khan's party that the vote was stolen. The PTI said on February 22, 2024, that the restrictions on X have been placed by the authorities to suppress its voice on social media.²¹

Earlier, on February 21, 2024, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller expressed concerns in a statement to reporters over the outage and restrictions on the freedom of expression and association in Pakistan.

"We continue to call on Pakistan to respect freedom of expression and restore access to a social media that has been restricted including Twitter, now known as X," Miller said. "We have and will continue to emphasize the importance of respecting these fundamental freedoms during our engagements with Pakistani officials."²²

Digital rights activists said the platform was used to protest the alleged rigging of the results.²³

Media watchdog Freedom Network called the undeclared ban on social networking platform X, which has been down in Pakistan since February 17 for unknown reasons, direct state-led censorship to deny citizens the right to express themselves.

The ban on X comes days after another ban was imposed on mobile phones and mobile internet on election day which was shocking and disallowed voters from using technology to easily move to polling stations.²⁴

The Economist article “Confusion reigns in Pakistan’s rigged election” it was said that:²⁵

Despite their strenuous efforts, the generals appear much less in control than they thought. Until very recently Nawaz Sharif seemed certain to be Pakistan’s next prime minister. On February 6th, his Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) party took out full-page adverts in major Pakistani newspapers announcing its imminent victory in elections on February 8th and anointing Mr. Sharif the head of its new government. Assured of the support of the country’s powerful army, which has in effect been running the country through a loyal caretaker government since Parliament was dissolved in August, Mr. Sharif, a three-time former prime minister, and his party appeared set to romp home. That confidence is starting to look premature. Mr. Sharif’s path had been cleared by the imprisonment of the country’s most popular politician, the former prime minister Imran Khan, and the de facto outlawing of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. Yet early results suggest that PTI candidates, running as independents, have nonetheless done much better than expected. More than 24 hours after polls closed, results had been announced for 148 of the country’s 265 directly elected parliamentary seats. These give independent candidates 61 seats to the PML-N’s 43.

The Economist article entitled “Pakistan is out of friends and out of money” published on February 14, 2024, maintained that:²⁶

A botched election and an economic crisis show how low it has fallen. Pakistan’s election on February 8th featured state-of-the-art avatars and TikTok videos, but the question it poses evokes an old theme. How long can the country’s relentless decline continue before it triggers a revolution, outside intervention, or—hope against hope—political renewal? For decades, the generals have ruled nuclear-armed Pakistan directly or via a stage-managed democracy featuring a recurring cast of corrupt dynastic parties (and the occasional political disrupter). The main political clans agreed to back a new government on February 13th. Unfortunately, after a rigged vote, it begins plagued by illegitimacy and a mounting financial crisis.

Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch in an article in the Guardian Weekly published on February 15, 2024, entitled “Pakistan’s generals’ elections: inside the 16 February Guardian Weekly, Pakistan” stated that:²⁷

When Pakistan holds an election, there’s an established pattern to how things generally play out. The military selects a preferred candidate (in this case Nawaz Sharif), and then discredits/exiles/imprisons the main challenger (in this case, Imran Khan). The vote is held, and the military’s preferred candidate wins. It is no wonder they are known inside the country as “the generals’ elections.” This time, things did not go quite according to plan. Despite Khan having been safely locked up, his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party came out on top – though not with an overall majority, sparking allegations of serious vote-rigging from PTI supporters..... The

military had tried and failed to stifle the PTI and its voters into submission before last week's vote. How will this all play out? . . . it was confirmed that Nawaz Sharif's PML-N party would after all form the government, in a complex coalition with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz's younger brother who is known to be close to the military, is likely to be prime minister, with the PPP co-chair Asif Ali Zardari as president. So, did the generals get their way after all? Maybe not. A marriage of convenience between two weak political parties, in defiance of the popular vote, merely illustrates the shaky state of Pakistan's democracy and seems unlikely to last for long. Mr. Khan's against-all-odds victory burnishes his status as a larger-than-life figure in Pakistan. The army and its allies threw everything they had at him. They barred Mr. Khan from running for Parliament, jailed scores of PTI leaders in addition to Mr. Khan, twisted the arms of others to leave the party, and disallowed the PTI from using its well-known electoral symbol, the cricket bat. All this appears only to have strengthened Mr. Khan. In theory, army chief Gen. Asim Munir could step down and make way for a successor more amenable to the PTI leader's return to power. But this would be such a massive capitulation from the military that it could throw the state into chaos. As long as Mr. Munir and his top generals remain opposed to Mr. Khan, his odds of getting out of prison—where he is serving at least 14 years on charges ranging from corruption to an “un-Islamic marriage” to his third wife—remain slim. The former prime minister denies any wrongdoing. Things would not look much sunnier even if Mr. Khan somehow clawed his way back to power. His brand of Islamic populism—railing against America and promising to turn Pakistan into a welfare state modeled on Medina in the time of the prophet Muhammad—may play well with voters, but it offers no long-term solutions to the country's deep economic problems. It seems unlikely that Islamabad will get its act together soon. Over more than seven decades, neither Pakistan's overbearing military nor its feckless politicians have provided the sustained good governance needed for economic development. Unfortunately, these problems do not look like they will be shrinking any time soon.

Protests continue across Pakistan, with several other parties claiming their mandates were stolen.²⁸

In its report, the Free and Fair Election Network, or FAFEN, an Islamabad observer group, said: “Many election officials failed to follow rules or make necessary arrangements to gather results promptly. More than a dozen people have died in postelection violence.”²⁹

The newly elected parliament will be sworn in in the next two weeks. The house will then elect its leader, who will serve as the prime minister. With Khan so far refusing to build an alliance with Zardari's PPP, the latter has agreed to throw his weight behind a coalition government led by PMLN. Analysts say that a minority government with no legitimacy will not survive for an exceptionally long time, despite the backing of the establishment.³⁰

Raza Rumi in his article “Elections 2024: Militabishment Should Accept Defeat” published in *The Friday Times*, on February 13, 2024, argued that:³¹

The farcical elections, instead of showing a path to stability, have plunged Pakistan into a deeper crisis. Widespread allegations of vote rigging have rendered the entire exercise dubious. The new coalition government led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN-) and supported by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) will be haunted by a deepening economic crisis and issues of legitimacy. The real winner of this election, i.e., Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) claims that it has been robbed of its mandate - a clear and substantial majority in the center and Punjab province. PTI candidates, contesting as independents sans their electoral symbol, in addition to numerous coercive, administrative, and legal measures, have emerged as the single largest parliamentary

group. This by itself was a major shock for the Militabishment, and its current allies the PML-N and the PPP. The PMLN was exposed as a party of the past stuck in a time warp and the latter, despite vote gains, was unable to make headway in the Punjab. Election 2024 is a clear win for PTI and is going to bolster its fortunes in the coming years. In addition to the 90-plus PTI-backed independents who won the elections, reports suggest that the tally would have been higher if late-night interventions were not made. PTI maintains that seats in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and other parts of the country were manipulated in the early hours of February 9. The Election Commission of Pakistan and the judiciary would ultimately adjudicate on the veracity of these claims, but it will not be any time sandpit voters displayed immense passion and resilience and were largely peaceful in casting their protest vote. The ridiculous cases against Imran Khan, especially the infamous Iddah verdict, contributed to public anger. It was not just anger, but the strategic use of technology that enabled the party to mobilize its voters amid draconian restrictions on its candidates, public gatherings, and campaigning. The PML-N has faced a near-rout in its strongholds, such as Lahore, Gujranwala, and Faisalabad in the Punjab province. The prevalent impression that the PML-N was the establishment's choice did not go down well with the electorate. It also led to a complacency among its candidates. This election should serve as a warning for the likes of the PML-N and the PPP that the era of dynastic politics is nearing extinction, not unlike India, where the Congress Party is becoming irrelevant, and its comeback seems next to impossible. Parties structured like a family enterprise are not going to attract the restive, increasingly middle-class, and urban voters. Short of a complete makeover, the old guard of national politics is becoming irrelevant to the younger population. Granted that the establishment played a key role in discrediting the PPP and the PML-N, they also are short of ideas as they encounter an unending wave of populism worsened by the economic downturn, inflation, and widening inequities. The establishment may have lost in the short term, but it has a history of rising like a phoenix. Its ideal arrangement is a weak, pliable civilian government that can protect the military's hegemony. But the sagging popularity of khakis, especially in their home ground — the Punjab province — will be a cause for concern. This is why there will be a need to recalibrate the institution's policy towards Imran Khan. The latter has already declared on numerous occasions that he is willing to talk. Now, that time may have arrived, and within a year or sooner, a negotiated settlement cannot be ruled out. The past year's events are also a testament to the fact that older tactics of repression, coercion, and trampling of the popular sentiment do not work in the digital age. The encroachments made into the civilian space and policymaking are untenable. The sooner the generals realize this, the better it is for the institution and the country.

In a surprising development, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) chief Sirajul Haq has said that the government should be given to the one who has been given the mandate by the people. Siraj said that the result of the elections led to increased polarization as the people decided one thing, but the results were different.

The JI chief claimed that a government imposed by force would not last, as the 2024 election was the most polluted and infamous one because the census itself was incorrect. Siraj said that the government does not run with fake elections and fake results. He claimed that great injustice had been done with his party which the common people were admitting, saying that seats were snatched in Karachi. Instead of elections, he said, they would have given their share to the people. Siraj demanded that the one who was given the mandate by the people should get the government.³²

Irfan Ghauri, in his article "Call for accountability amidst chaos" published in the Express Tribune, on February 19, 2024, maintained that:³³

The resonance of Pakistan's 2024 elections has gone far beyond its borders, with regional and international media vehemently denouncing the process as exceptionally unfair, non-transparent, and heavily rigged in the nation's history. Amid this uproar, an informal alliance comprising the PTI, the JUI, the JI, the GDA, and some other smaller groups has been mobilizing nationwide protests against the alleged rigging, adding another layer to an already complex and highly unstable political scenario. The startling admission by the Rawalpindi division commissioner, Liaqat Ali Chatha, has introduced yet another layer of turmoil to the nation's precarious political landscape. His shocking revelation of orchestrating large-scale election rigging, including the addition of forged votes and manipulation of results, has sent shockwaves through the country. Here a question emerges: if the commissioner's avowal is true then why should only, he bear the consequences while the alleged masterminds behind these machinations spanning dozens of national and provincial assemblies' constituencies across the country remain untouched? The responsibility for these shameless acts of election rigging squarely falls on the interim government, because its only mandate was to stay in power till a new government elected through a process of free and fair elections comes to power. However, the motivations and driving forces behind such manipulations remain a puzzle that needs unraveling to shed light on the murky underbelly of Pakistan's political system. Analyzing the power dynamics, the blame game unfolds across many potential bases of power: The Interim government, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the PML-N and the PPP, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), the establishment, and the superior judiciary. Despite the interim government's significant leverage over civil servants, it lacks the power to coerce them into such egregious acts of betrayal. The ECP, often perceived as having authority over district returning officers (DROs), lacks the influence to prevent the civil administration from engaging in election rigging. However, like these elections, many past elections have highlighted the ECP's failure to incorporate mechanisms ensuring transparency in the polling and result tabulation process, demanding a thorough investigation. Despite being granted legal powers and resources through comprehensive legislative mechanisms, the ECP consistently introduces so-called novel technology-based systems in every election, only to face repeated failures. Following the 2018 RTS debacle, the much-anticipated Election Management System, designed to compile and transmit results promptly, also faltered in the February 8 elections. Political powerhouses like the PML-N in Punjab, the PPP in Sindh, and the MQM-P in Karachi, known for their ability to foster loyalties, are considered insufficient to coerce the civil bureaucracy into committing crimes that could dangerously plunge the country into civil strife. The establishment, recognized for its independent actions, allegedly asserts dominance over civilian institutions, relegating them to inconsequential roles.... Commissioner Chatha's admission of responsibility, deflecting blame from the real players, underscores the coercion faced by individuals and their families until they capitulate. A comprehensive investigation is imperative to restore public confidence in Pakistan's electoral infrastructure. Yet, a looming question is who will conduct such an investigation in a country where serious national crimes are often swept under the carpet? Political parties victimized in one election become integral to maneuvering in the next, perpetuating a vicious cycle. The influential ruling class continues to thrive at the expense of the suffering masses who cast their votes, while ordinary political workers endure hardships, hoping for a better future. However, this status quo cannot persist indefinitely.

Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) has joined the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) in raising concerns over the transparency of the general elections in Pakistan. In an official statement, the (EU) stated: ³⁴

The European Union takes note of the completion of the polling in the general elections, which took place on 8 February in Pakistan, following several months of postponement and uncertainty, and in a context of a tense security environment.” The participation by the Pakistani people to exercise their right to vote, despite systemic barriers still faced by women and persons belonging to minorities, demonstrates their commitment to democracy and the rule of law. The EU welcomes the increased number of women registered to vote compared to the last elections. 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. We therefore call 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. The authorities were faced with the challenging task of countering serious terrorist threats and attacks. The EU condemns all acts of violence, which took place in the lead-up to the elections and calls on all parties and actors to use peaceful and democratic mechanisms to settle differences, refraining from further violence. The EU attaches paramount importance to political pluralism, democratic values, independent media, vibrant civil society, judicial independence, and international human rights standards, which are key for democratic elections. We call on all political actors in Pakistan to engage in a peaceful and inclusive dialogue aiming at the formation of a stable government and to respect human rights in line with the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, as well as with international treaties to which Pakistan is a party. Pakistan is an important partner for the European Union, and we look forward to continuing to work with the Government of Pakistan on the priorities agreed in the EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan. We encourage Pakistan to continue reforms in the areas of human rights, good governance, as well as labor rights, and environmental standards, to address the shortcomings outlined in the GSP+ report of November 2023, and to continue the necessary economic reforms.

Charlie Campbell in his article entitled “Pakistan’s Military Used Every Trick to Sideline Imran Khan—and Failed. Now What?” published in the Time on February 9, 2024, reported that: ³⁵

He’s been shot, jailed, had his political party effectively banned, and his name purged from mainstream media. But you just can’t keep Imran Khan down. Preliminary results from Thursday’s election in Pakistan seem to show that independent candidates affiliated with Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party have a chance of securing a plurality of legislative seats despite myriad irregularities, which continued through polling day, designed to hobble such an outcome. The PTI already had its famed cricket-bat logo banned, and a nationwide suspension of cellphone networks on Thursday hindered party officials from informing supporters of their preferred independent candidate for each constituency. (The government claimed the blackout was for security reasons despite such measures being deemed illegal by Pakistan’s High Court.) In addition, exit polls were banned and the PTI complained that their agents were barred from monitoring polling stations. “The amount of rigging going on is beyond ridiculous,” Zulfi Bukhari, a former Minister of State under Khan, tells TIME. Still, when results finally started trickling in—over 10 hours later than customary, which observers say is highly suspicious—the PTI was neck and neck with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of three-time former

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of assassinated ex-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, in third place. Sharif is the preferred candidate of Pakistan's powerful military, which, despite backing his ouster thrice in the past, recently allowed the 74-year-old back from exile in the U.K., quashed his corruption conviction, and repealed his lifetime ban from politics. Sharif's speedy rehabilitation stood in stark contrast to the generals' Khan-and-PTI purge. "No one rules without the tacit support of the military," says Maya Tudor, an associate professor of government and public policy at Oxford University. "What's different this time is how overtly the military is targeting the PTI, because they have grassroots support and are technologically savvy." Yet even if the PTI, against all odds, secures a plurality of legislative seats, many obstacles to forming a government remain. Since its lawmakers are officially independents, there's no obligation for them to vote along party lines for key appointments, raising the prospect of coerced defections. Moreover, the PTI is not eligible for its share of the National Assembly's 70 "reserved seats" for women and minorities that are divvied up according to a party's proportion of the overall vote. And then there is the fact that Khan, 71, remains in prison and is unable to stand as a lawmaker himself. Even before the vote, there were widespread rumors of a power-sharing pact between the PML-N and PPP, with Sharif serving as prime minister and Zardari as president. A coalition between the two remains the most likely outcome. Still, the strength of PTI's showing is a bloody nose for Pakistan's military, which previously backed Khan before his 2018 election victory. However, the generals fell out spectacularly with the former national cricket captain and engineered his ouster in an April 2022 no-confidence vote. Since then, Khan has survived an assassination attempt and weathered a tsunami of over 180 legal challenges. In recent weeks alone, he received prison sentences totaling 31 years for corruption, leaking state secrets, and having an "un-Islamic" marriage. Yet his popularity remained strong leading up to the vote, especially among young Pakistanis, with voters aged 18-35 comprising 45% of the nearly 130 million-strong electorate. "It's very clear that the military was nervous and then to see PTI exceed expectations is a big blow," says Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center. The Pakistani public and political class now await the full results and, no doubt, much horse-trading to come. The nuclear-armed nation of 240 million can little afford a power vacuum with whoever ends up taking the top job facing no shortage of crises. ...And presuming Pakistan's military continues to pursue its goal of shutting the PTI out of power, the question remains how PTI supporters will react to their disenfranchisement, not least given the grim state of the economy. On May 9, PTI supporters ransacked military premises in response to an earlier, fleeting arrest of Khan. He may remain behind bars, but Thursday's election shows the sporting icon is far from done as a political force. "The military wants the next government to focus on economic recovery and hoped it could put the Imran Khan genie back into the bottle by having him in jail for a few years," says Kugelman. "But the challenges are only going to grow because the PTI base will only become more aggrieved."

Astha Rajvanshi in his article entitled "Pioneering Human Rights Lawyer Hina Jilani Warns of Pakistan's Unstable Future" published in Time on February 15, 2024, says that:³⁶

In the lead-up to this year's elections, HRCP began issuing warnings over electoral fairness, pointing to pre-poll vote rigging and blatant electoral manipulation. "At this point, there is little evidence to show that the upcoming elections will be free, fair, or credible," said HRCP co-chair Munizae Jahangir during a January press conference in Islamabad. A lot of what HRCP observed on the ground had already occurred in 2018 when pre-election engineering and military intelligence saw Khan coming into power in the first place. "There were well-documented

incidents of candidates being forced to leave their party to join Imran Khan's party," Jilani says. "And when the military and Khan fell out and started exposing each other, it led to a lot of suspicion about the contiguity of the 2018 election results." Still, this year's results have managed to surprise everyone, including Jilani. "It's strange for me to say this, but I don't think the Pakistani public has ever played a strong role in enforcing democracy in this country," she says. "Yes, there have been very brave, courageous people who have waged some kind of opposition or resistance, but we have not seen a public uprising against the military takeover of political space in this country. "It is for this reason that PTI's surprise win has also been so exceptional, Jilani says: "Despite the constraints imposed and attempts made by the military establishment to deter or discourage the voters from voting, there was still a vast number of people who did come out and vote. "What PTI-affiliated independents do next also matter greatly. "They may choose to join a different party," Jilani speculates. "On the other hand, the PTI has lost the status of a party, so they will have to find legal ways under the Constitution to declare themselves as a single party and form a government." And then there is the matter of Khan, who will remain an important political figure even after the government is formed, given that so many candidates are contesting in his name. "His party, the PTI, still exists. Now, it will have to do a lot of things in the right way," she says, referring to the slew of corruption allegations that PTI officials are currently facing in court.

Earlier, the US Department of State spokesperson Matthew Miller called for an investigation of rigging allegations in the Pakistan general results held on February 8.

On being asked about US lawmakers calling on the State Department not to accept the results of the Pakistan election until allegations of rigging are investigated, Miller said, "So we have called for those allegations to be investigated. We think that is the appropriate step to take. That's - that is our response to questions of irregularities not just in Pakistan, but when we see them anywhere in the world."

"We think that they're thoroughly investigated and resolved. And so that - we will continue to call for that. But at the same time, it is clear that the elections in Pakistan were competitive, and we look forward to working with the government, once it is formed, that the people of Pakistan elected," he added.

After days of speculation and anticipation, the PMLN, and the PPP have come together to form a coalition government in the wake of the 2024 general elections, which yielded a hung parliament.

Shehbaz Sharif has emerged as the consensus candidate for the position of prime minister, diverging from the original plan of having Nawaz Sharif in the lead role.

The PPP has agreed to support Shehbaz Sharif's candidacy, albeit with certain conditions attached.

The PPP is eyeing key constitutional positions of the Presidency, Senate chair, and National Assembly speakership, with the backing of the PMLN.

The coalition's strength will face a litmus test in Parliament, where they must secure enough votes for their government to be legitimized.

This new iteration of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) includes leaders from six parties, including defections from independent candidates backed by the PTI. Some of these individuals have already switched allegiance to joining the Sharifs' camp.

As it stands, the coalition formed by Shehbaz Sharif has amassed a total of 152 general seats. However, with his party holding only 75 out of the 336 seats in the National Assembly, a significant gap remains to achieve a majority.

To bolster their numbers, Shehbaz has hinted at courting independent lawmakers, with reports suggesting that 10 of them have already pledged their support.... PDM 2.0, the new coalition presented as a reconciliation effort, is poised to face challenges from its inception due to a lack of widespread popular support.³⁷

On February 16, 2024, PTI senior leader Barrister Gohar Ali Khan said Omar Ayub Khan would be the party's candidate for the office of prime minister and Mian Aslam Iqbal for the slot of Punjab chief minister. Gohar said the party was confident of Omar Ayub's election as prime minister and that he would stay until Imran was released.

He said the PTI which was in all the provinces and had a two-thirds majority in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, was being limited and a party having zero credibility and barely 20 seats was being given power. The people will not accept such a mandate.

Gohar said his party had announced a peaceful protest of the alleged rigging and invited all parties, including Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Jamaat-e-Islami, and GDA, to participate in it on Saturday.

Speaking on the occasion, PTI leader Sher Afzal Marwat said, "We have placed the whole situation before Imran Khan and Khan Sahib is clear that we cannot share power with PMLN and PPP under any circumstances."

He said the PTI will show Form-45 of all the party-backed candidates who had been robbed of their win and Salman Akram Raja will give a presentation in this connection to the local and international media at a local hotel.

Asad alleged that the February 8 elections were the worst elections that had no credibility, and no one was ready to accept them. He charged that his party's mandate had been stolen against which a protest would be held across the country, and he would try to talk to different parties in this connection.³⁸

In a surprise move, Imran Khan has been desperately knocking at the doors of the US for help, which he had earlier blamed to be the major conspirators behind his ousting from the government.

From Khan's removal from the government to his arrest following the May 9 attacks and matters involving recently held elections in the country, Imran Khan has repeatedly approached the US either for his help or for its interference in the domestic politics of the country.

After no-confidence in April 2021, Khan has since blamed a US-led foreign conspiracy that also involved Pakistan's powerful military establishment and his political rivals.

Imran Khan claimed that the US "threatened" him and was seeking his removal from office as he faced a no-confidence vote that could mean the end of his premiership.

However, in November 2021 Khan signaled his readiness to mend fences with the US after repeatedly accusing Washington of conspiring to remove him from power in April.

The US chapter of PTI also hired two lobbying firms in the US to make Americans aware of the threat to Imran Khan's life. The move highlighted PTI's efforts to win over sympathies for Khan in the US where he is not very popular.

Before his arrest on the May 9 attacks, Imran Khan again spoke to US Democrat lawmakers Ted Lieu, Eric Swalwell, Brad Sherman, and Mike Levin, urging them to support his demand for free and fair elections in Pakistan.

When Khan was arrested following the May 9 attacks, an alleged audio leak of a Zoom meeting surfaced between him and US Congresswoman Maxine Moore Waters in which he pleaded for congresswomen's support and her voice to favor him.

Another red line was crossed when the PTI-led rally in the US sought support from them to impose sanctions on the military alleging violation of human rights. The accusations of rights violations follow the crackdown on leaders of the PTI as well as workers, after the May 9 attacks which targeted key military institutions including the GHQ and the Lahore corps commander's residence.

In the PTI rally held outside the White House, it was also reported that the PTI leaders also urged the Biden administration not to deal with an extremely unpopular government, which has no moral justification for continuing to rule Pakistan.

Before the general elections, PTI's US chapter again hired a new public relations and lobbying firm to monitor Pakistan polls and to engage with the US and international media.

Meanwhile, Khan said that the US did not fulfill its duty against the anti-PTI measures, adding that America has always patronized and imposed dictators and installed corrupt people as rulers.

Khan stressed that it was an opportunity for the US to rectify its past actions and added that the US should keep monitoring election rigging in Pakistan. Imran Khan said that it is America's responsibility to raise its voice on the transparency of elections in Pakistan. He lamented that the US acts like the voice of democracy in the entire world, but both the US and Europe have maintained silence on rigging in the elections in Pakistan. He further said that the US should pressurize those involved in rigging instead of issuing such cosmetic statements.³⁹

Meanwhile, in a surprising development, Hafiz Naeem ur Rehman of the Jamaat-e-Islami party had been named the victor of the provincial assembly seat PS-129 in the city of Karachi.

But this week he claimed the candidate backed by Imran Khan's PTI party had secured far more votes and that their tally had been reduced.

As such he would relinquish the seat.

"If anyone wants to make us win illegitimately, we will not be accepting that," Mr. Rehman said at a press conference held by his party on Monday.

He added: "Public opinion should be respected, let the winner win, let the loser lose, no one should get anything extra."

He said that while he had received more than 26,000 votes, the independent candidate Saif Bari, backed by the PTI, had gotten 31,000 votes - but these were presented as 11,000 votes.

Pakistani electoral authorities have denied the allegations. It is unclear who will accept the PS-129 seat now.

But the incident is just the latest highlighting the crisis around Pakistan's elections held earlier, which have been marred by allegations of widespread vote fraud and interference, which damaged candidates affiliated with Khan.⁴⁰

However, the PTI argues such candidates should have won even more votes and more seats. They have alleged numerous instances of vote rigging and welcomed the Islamist party's relinquishing of the Karachi seat.

Meanwhile, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller says the US has called for rigging allegations in Pakistan general elections to be investigated.

On February 14, 2024, Matthew Miller said the US thinks that an investigation of rigging is an appropriate step to take. "That is our response to questions of irregularities not just in Pakistan, but when we see them anywhere in the world and we think that they're thoroughly investigated and resolved," he said. Replying to a question, he said elections in Pakistan were competitive, and we look forward to working with the government, once it is formed, that the people of Pakistan elected. He said the formation of a coalition government is an internal matter of Pakistan. That is not a decision for the US to make. It is a decision for Pakistan to make. Miller said several countries have parliamentary systems of government, where no party gains a majority and some kind of coalition governments are formed.⁴¹

Zahid Hussain in his article "Polls and their aftermath" published in Dawn on February 14, 2024, said that:⁴²

It was perhaps the most consequential election in Pakistan's recent history. Defying all odds, the voters turned out in record numbers. They have spoken aloud and clearly, and given their verdict. It was a vote for hope and democracy. But the people's mandate seems to have been stolen yet again. Events in the run-up to the elections had left little faith in the fairness of the polls. Still, the people came out, breaking down the walls of fear and hoping to bring change through the power of the ballot. The massive turnout of youth and women voters made a difference. It was a protest vote against political repression and the status quo. The anti-establishment sentiment was quite palpable. The voting trend and initial poll results from Punjab and KP indicated a total rout of parties seen as having the military's backing, in particular the PML-N. The PTI candidates took the lead in major constituencies. Yet the final tally showed an incredibly different result. Many of the PMLN heavyweights who were lagging far behind PTI-affiliated candidates till late night were declared the winners the next morning. How this amazing turnaround happened is anybody's guess. However, it was a different story in KP, where the result could not be altered much. The PTI held its ground in its main bastion. It is certainly not the first time that the country has witnessed such a mysterious overnight turnaround of poll results. We saw it, too, in the 2018 elections. It all depends on who is the favorite of the security establishment at the time. There was no doubt that the PTI was the main beneficiary of the 'hand of God' in the previous election. But what happened this time has hardly any precedent. It was a protest vote against political repression and the status quo. The large-scale poll irregularities have drawn a strong international reaction. The US, the UK, and the European Union have separately expressed concerns about Pakistan's electoral process and urged a probe into the reported irregularities. But the most damning statement on the elections came from the UN secretary general, who called on the Pakistani authorities and political leaders to resolve the issues related to the election "through the established legal frameworks" and to refrain from taking any action that could raise tensions. It is almost unprecedented for a UN official to make such remarks on an issue generally considered to be a country's internal matter. These statements by the international community cannot be brushed aside. They clearly show the worsening global perception of Pakistan's democratic process. It also brings into question the alleged involvement of the security establishment in manipulating the electoral process. Its footprints could be seen all over. Despite the alleged irregularities, the PTI-backed 'independents' have emerged as the single largest particular group

in the next National Assembly. However, since the PTI is not recognized as a parliamentary party, it cannot get its share of some 70 reserved seats for women and religious minorities. Hence, the party cannot achieve even a simple majority to form a government at the center. Moreover, it would be extremely tough for the group to maintain its unity in the face of intimidation by the security agencies and horse-trading. Meanwhile, a new power play has begun, disregarding all democratic norms. Wheeling and dealing are the name of the game. It is all about power and control that has brought together vested interests. ... Sharif called for the formation of a unity government, comprising all the major parties, including the independents. He has also talked about a healing touch to unite the nation. It all sounds good, but it does not go beyond rhetoric. In a similar statement, the army chief also urged Pakistan's political parties to form a "unified government" to help the country move on from the politics of "anarchy and polarization." It is rare for an army chief to issue such political statements. It is not the mandate of the military leadership to tell the political leadership what kind of government there should be. But given the deep involvement of the security establishment in the political power equation, it has not come as a surprise. It also provides some insight into the emerging civil-military relationship. The security establishment's domination in the anticipated political set-up is likely to strengthen in a politically divided country. The unity that Sharif and the army chief are calling for cannot be achieved with the distortion of the democratic process. The allegation of election irregularities has further destabilized the country.... The political fallout of a questionable electoral process cannot be easily resolved. Surely the country needs a healing touch but that can only happen by restoring the democratic rights of the people.

Husain Haqqani, in his article "Moving Forward after the Election," published in *The News* on February 15, 2024, argued that:⁴³

The unexpected results of Pakistan's twelfth general election, held on February 8, have created both a threat and an opportunity for the country. The threat is one of political deadlock and confrontation; the opportunity is for defining a political way forward that is different from Pakistan's turbulent past. Most observers agree that voters expressed their disdain for establishment meddling in politics and showed disapproval for high-handedness and repression by voting for Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) affiliated independents. The PTI deserves credit for pushing back against restrictions and intimidation to mobilize its support base -- young Pakistanis angry with the status quo and lack of opportunities, unimpressed by corruption and dynastic politics, and looking upon Imran Khan as the country's savior. Imran Khan, once the establishment's choice, has benefited from the narrative built over three decades to describe traditional politicians (and others questioning the establishment's policy prescriptions) as 'crooks or traitors.' The establishment may have realized in 2022 that polarizing the nation is not a recipe for national success, but its traditional constituencies have not. Imran Khan has used the establishment's decision to stop supporting his polarizing rhetoric to turn establishment-supporting voters against the establishment.... There is no doubt that the PTI was denied a level playing field in the elections, as has been the case with any party disfavored by the establishment in past Pakistani elections as well. But past victims of the establishment negotiated with other political parties bargained with the establishment and found a way forward. Allegations of poll rigging are unlikely to change the fact that the PTI will not be able to form a government either at the center or in Punjab. The PTI has refused to talk to other major parties and its numbers alone are not enough to constitute a parliamentary majority. Petitions for recounts or repolling in individual seats could take a long time to wend their way through the legal system. Every Pakistani election has been followed by one or another party complaining about its mandate being

stolen, sometimes with good reason. But eventually, elected assemblies are convened, governments are formed, and life goes on. Although Pakistan's politics can take unexpected turns at any time, the chances that social media activism and a vocal younger generation's frustrations will lead to a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order appear slim now. It is true that the PTI is facing the brunt of state repression and is, therefore, gaining sympathy. But the legacy political parties that have been targets of similar repression in the past are far from decimated. The formation of government by parties other than the largest group is known in parliamentary democracies after an inconclusive election. Pakistan needs a government to deal with critical issues such as negotiations with the IMF and other creditors over a new economic bailout. Both the PML and PPP realize that taking the helm of Pakistan at this moment amounts to wearing a crown of thorns. The PML seems willing to do it while others have their eye on the next election. Not having a functioning government would be worse than having a weak government. Instead of letting uncertainty and instability persist, Pakistan's politicians could take a path they have never taken before. They could forsake personal conflicts, and extreme narratives portraying each other as irreconcilable enemies engaged in battle, to form a government of national unity. The PTI could join it, state repression could end, and genuine national reconciliation could begin.

Abid Hussain, in his article 'Mandate thieves': New Pakistan government takes shape amid a slew of Jabs" published on Aljazeera, on February 14, 2024, maintained that:⁴⁴

With the assembly session expected to start on February 29, critics of the PMLN-led alliance are raising questions about the sustainability of the incoming government, drawing parallels with the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition that ruled the country for 16 months starting April 2022.

The PDM, led by the PMLN and PPP, had come to power after deposing then-Prime Minister Khan through a vote of no confidence — much like the PTI and its supporters are accusing the six-party coalition of conspiring to keep them out of office. Shehbaz Sharif, the prime minister during the PDM tenure, has once again been nominated as the coalition's choice for prime minister. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the chairperson of the PPP and a foreign minister during the PDM government, had earlier ruled himself out of the race for prime minister, accepting that his party had not received the mandate for the top job. The PMLN's Iqbal said that facing political and economic instability, parties must set aside differences after the election to work together. The former federal minister said that instead of pursuing "negative politics," every party must now focus on competing on governance and delivery.

"Traditional parties are seasoned. They have learned the art of competition and collaboration simultaneously. They compete for their partisan politics but also can forge collaboration on national issues. Unlike PTI, which is always in confrontation mode," Iqbal added.

"Government and opposition are wheels of the same cart, and on national issues, they both must talk to each other. "We will again reach out to everybody in the parliament for a consensus on a charter of the economy and try to persuade them to work on such matters together," he said.

PTI's Bukhari, though, argued that Pakistan has already seen the performance of the PDM once and that the six-party coalition had nothing new to offer.

Bukhari, who is also an adviser to Khan, said that his party's foremost priority is to seek "justice" regarding the alleged manipulation of the elections.

He added that the party will pursue legal avenues, as well as "show proof of rigging, both nationally and internationally."

“We are happy to sit back and wait for the courts and ECP to decide on our cases, as we firmly believe that our rightful mandate was stolen and we will go to every length to get back what is ours,” Bukhari said.

“Till then, though, we will present the toughest, most robust, and constructive opposition in the country’s history.” A six-party alliance appears poised to form Pakistan’s next government, after a week of political drama following ⁴⁵

Omar Waraich, in his article “Angry Young Pakistanis Give Imran Khan a Future Shot at Power” published in Foreign Policy on February 12, 2024, maintained that: ⁴⁶

Immured in his prison cell, Pakistani politician Imran Khan could scarcely have hoped for a better result. Just days before the country’s Feb. 8 election, the cricket legend-turned-populist politician was sentenced to more than a decade behind bars in three trumped-up cases. His party was stripped of its signature cricket bat symbol by the Election Commission, denying voters the chance to identify the party on ballot papers—a critical aspect of voting in a country where 40 percent of people are illiterate—and forcing its candidates to run as independents. Its members were beaten, imprisoned, and driven into rival parties or out of politics altogether.

On polling day, cell phone signals vanished, and internet access was choked. After the votes were cast, there were widespread allegations that many were stolen overnight, reversing unassailable leads. And yet, despite every effort to thwart them, Khan’s supporters recorded the highest number of votes and clinched the largest number of seats.

Independent candidates affiliated with Khan’s party, who took 93 out of a total of 295 national seats and won one province outright, were denied the majority that they insist they won and may be excluded from government, but the vote represents a momentous development. A new generation of voters has emerged—concentrated in Pakistan’s heaving towns and cities—who now demand a break with history. These voters want to have the power to choose their leaders, not leave the country in the hands of the powerful military that has maintained a granitic grip on politics for most of its history.

When Khan fell out with the generals that brought him to power and was ousted from office in April 2022, his young supporters mounted vast, sometimes violent protests. Despite a vicious crackdown over the next two years, they persevered and demonstrated their defiance in the only way left to them: through a peaceful, democratic vote.

The determination of young voters to decide their futures may become a trend this year in the global south as billions go to the polls in at least 64 countries. Pakistan has an increasingly young and growing population. With the fifth-largest population in the world, nearly half of all eligible voters are age 35 and younger. Since the last election, in 2018, 21 million new voters have been registered. That trend will inexorably continue over the next couple of decades—Pakistan is home to about 100 million people under the age of 18.

This is a generation of Pakistanis who have grown up with the sense of being a nation long denied its promise: mired in economic difficulty, scarred by years of terrorism, ravaged by climate change, dismayed by how their country is perceived in the world, and angry at the feckless and venal elites that have reduced them to this ruin.

For many of these voters, Khan represented something new. In the lead-up to the 2018 election, he stirred rare feelings of national pride, something that he has proved effective at ever since lifting Pakistan’s only Cricket World Cup trophy in 1992. They liked his charisma, his religious fervor, his charity work, and his

celebrity. Khan skillfully tapped this mood for change, casting himself as a man of destiny who would single-handedly sweep away the country's many problems and suddenly lift Pakistan to the glory it deserved.

There was little scrutiny of the plausibility of his promises. It was enough that someone was making them.

At the time, Khan's popularity was significant but not decisive. The military had grown weary of the two political dynasties that had dominated the fitful periods of civilian rule in the country, the center-right Sharifs of the Muslim League, and the center-left Bhutto-Zardaris of the People's Party. In Khan, the military saw someone who, with his confident English and Oxford University education, could provide a useful civilian veneer as it clung to the main levers of power.

The 2018 election that thrust Khan into the prime minister's house was marred by many of the "irregularities" that his supporters now complain of a former prime minister in prison, a tilted electoral playing field, intimidation of candidates, and a late-night burst of creative arithmetic.

During his three and a half years in government, Khan proved a disappointment to his supporters and a danger to his critics and opponents. His cabinet was full of familiar, shop-worn faces, including his foreign minister and interior minister, plucked from the same ruling elite that he had railed against. None of the dreams that he promised materialized. The economy shambled on modestly, with a few new welfarist schemes rolled out.

Michael Kugelman, in his article "How Imran Khan's Party Stunned Pakistan," said that.

"The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party won't take power, but it capitalized on public discontent to deliver a rebuke to the establishment."⁴⁷

Meanwhile, a four-party alliance, comprising the National Party (NP), Balochistan National Party (BNP), Pakhtunkhwa Mili Awami Party (PKMAP), and Hazara Democratic Party, is staging a demonstration in front of the district returning office (DRO) in Quetta over alleged rigging in the polls.

The protesters have demanded election results to be issued based on Form 45.

Meanwhile, workers of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have staged a sit-in in front of the returning officer's (RO) office against alleged manipulation of election results in Naseerabad.

Meanwhile, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Miranshah-Bannu and Shewah-Mir Ali roads have been blocked by protesters belonging from the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F).⁴⁸

On February 18 Commissioner Rawalpindi Liaqat Ali Chatha resigned from his position after acknowledging that there had been alleged electoral manipulation in 2024.

Chattha acknowledged that election tampering occurred and that under his supervision, candidates with a lead in their constituencies and over 70,000 votes were turned into losers with the use of fictitious seals.

Barrister Gohar from the PTI called for a quick investigation into the claims of rigging made by the Commissioner. He claimed that the Commissioner had to identify the victorious candidates when he declared that they had been defeated.

The PTI leader claimed, "We were winning the election based on Form 45, but later our candidates were defeated with Form 47." The Commissioner's statement, according to Barrister Gohar, is extremely serious. "If we go towards a new election, we have to open Pandora's Box," he continued.

On February 19, 2024, it was announced that independent candidates backed by Pakistan's jailed former prime minister who won seats in the elections will join the minority Sunni Ittehad Council, a political party, to form a government.

Parties are allocated 70 reserved seats - 60 for women, 10 for non-Muslims - in proportion to the number of seats won. This completes the National Assembly's total 336 seats. Independents are not eligible for reserved seats.⁴⁹

Zahid Hussain in his article "Hybrid rule 3.0" published in Dawn, on February 21, 2024, says that:⁵⁰

It is a royal mess that is hard to clean up. A hung parliament through a controversial election has pushed the country deeper into the mire. It has been almost two weeks since the general elections were held on Feb 8, but there is no sign of a new dispensation taking shape. A thick cloud of uncertainty continues to hang over the country's political landscape. While the PTI is still not out of the race, the two other major political parties — the PML-N and PPP — are engaged in **hard bargaining** for the formation of a **new coalition arrangement**, amid **widespread protests** against alleged poll rigging. The **confession** of the Rawalpindi commissioner, who resigned from his post, about his role in vote manipulation has raised more questions about the legitimacy of the entire electoral process. It is certainly not the outcome of the long-awaited polls one wanted to see. It is the unraveling of the entire political power structure. But re-engineering work is on to prop up the old order already rejected by the electorate. The intermittent shutdown of social media seems to be a part of the effort to stifle opposition voices. One is, however, not sure whether these efforts will bring any political stability to a country in deep turmoil with the official result of the elections now almost fully compiled, the PTI-supported independent bloc is ahead of the other political parties in the next National Assembly, despite the alleged electoral manipulation. The PTI's **latest decision to merge** its parliamentary party with the Sunni Ittehad Council in the House is supposed to be part of its tactics to get its share of some 70 reserve seats, thus keeping the group in the race to form the new government engineering work is on to prop up the old order already rejected by the electorate. Moreover, the PTI leadership also seems hopeful of snatching some more seats by **challenging** some controversial results in court. But it will still be difficult for the party to get the required number to form the government at the center on its own. The party has already declared it will not enter into any power-sharing arrangement with the PML-N and PPP. Yet its formidable presence in the National Assembly could present a constant challenge to a prospective PML-N-led coalition government. The PTI's decision to stay in the game seems to have frustrated the plan that aimed to completely sideline the party. Notwithstanding the alleged manipulations, the elections have changed the country's political dynamics making it extremely hard for the ubiquitous security establishment to set its own rules. Its leadership seems to have come out bruised in the process and has been a vote against the military's role in political powerplay as well as its overarching presence in almost all aspects of the state. Yet there is no indication of the generals taking a back seat. Instead, the meddling of the security establishment in politics is likely to be enhanced, given the fragmented electoral mandate. Its reported role in pushing the PML-N and PPP to reach an agreement on the formation of a coalition government has not been denied. While there appears to be consensus among the PPP and smaller parties to support Shehbaz Sharif, the PML-N nominee for prime minister, there is no agreement yet on the power-sharing formula. The PPP, whose support is crucial for any future set-up, is playing hard to get on the issue of joining the cabinet, while bargaining for key constitutional positions, including the post of president. The PPP has **maintained**

[its control] over Sindh and is also poised to lead a coalition government in Balochistan, raising the stakes in the power game. Past master in the politics of wheeling and dealing, Asif Ali Zardari is trying to [extract maximum advantage] for his party before finally agreeing to the PPP joining the government. The party has already made it public that Zardari will be a candidate for president. The issue seems to be a sticking point in the ongoing negotiations between the two parties. Meanwhile, there also seems to be establishment pressure on the party to be a part of the incoming administration rather than supporting it from the outside. If a deal is struck, the future ruling coalition will not be different from the previous Shehbaz Sharif-led hybrid administration, with the security establishment having a significant role in all policy matters. Most interesting, however, is Nawaz Sharif's decision to stand down as a candidate for prime minister. The party's entire election campaign had revolved around his return to power. It seems that his party's failure to achieve even a simple majority was the main reason for the withdrawal of his candidature. He did not want to lead a coalition government that would include the PP. So, Shehbaz Sharif, who has worked well with the military as well as other political parties in the past, is considered the right choice to lead the future coalition government. Nawaz Sharif has, however, made sure that the mantle of Punjab chief minister will go to his daughter and heir apparent Maryam Nawaz. Being the largest single party in the Punjab Assembly, the PMLN may not have any difficulty in forming the government in the province, with the support of some independents not associated with the PTI. Some of them have already jumped onto the PMLN's bandwagon. Maryam Nawaz's nomination marks the continuation of the dynastic control of the Sharif family over Punjab. What is most problematic, however, is the issue of different political parties ruling the provinces. While the Sindh government, led by the PPP, can coexist with the ruling coalition at the center, it will not be easy for the PTI government in KP to work with the PMLN administration in Islamabad. These inherent problems would make it extremely difficult for a minority government at the center to deliver on the critical problems related to governance, economy, and internal security. There is no way the system can work in this atmosphere of confrontation. The future does not look that good for the country, post-election.

Arifa Noor in her article "A Giant's Strength," published in Dawn on February 20, 2024, argues that: ⁵¹

It is time to be worried. Worried for Pakistan. Our political engineering formula has come undone. The [Hawa] which was blowing hard could not secure a win for the blue-eyed party and engineer an election in Punjab. The ever capricious electables have been playing up for some time now and refuse to swing around with the wind. And parties refuse to fall apart quietly after the first dozen or so among their leadership are given a software update. And then, the people. Decades ago, it was decided they were illiterate, poor, and desperate for money, and hence the political process could be reduced to 'they sell their vote for a few thousand, let's not blame them,' while the more organized or better off went for the promise of a *nali* (drain) or *sadak* (road). But this time around, the poor and the *sadak* lovers have changed their colors. Their blood has also turned white. Caste and community no longer mean the political world to them. They have turned into selfish adults who want to exercise the individual right to vote, even encouraging their mothers and sisters to think similarly. The absence of the bat did not confuse them, for the wily creatures used smartphones, believing it over mainstream media. Instead of the meek, the tech-savvy are threatening to inherit the earth. Resultantly, those who are clinging on [decided to switch off Twitter] (X). Crisis management does not get more effective than this. After all, as far as tactics go, it is subtler than upturning results in constituencies where the infamous Form 45s were handed out long before someone found out that it was not enough to beat people black and blue, and that races must be managed. It seems as if those who had made sure no one got hold of Form 45 in 2018 have been sent home and an undergraduate lot, which still has not attended Post-Poll Rigging 101, is in charge. That PDM 2.0 is about to be revived is a

triumph of hope over experience. The civilian side is not handling the new breakups and romances well either. One political party ran a superb campaign rooted in the 1990s for an election taking place in 2024. It came second but was the first to hold a victory celebration and declare itself the biggest party. Confusion over numbers or just confidence in the engineers? Who knows? But they tried to wiggle out of the federal government once the PPP began playing hard to get; however, the confession of a Rawalpindi commissioner soon put an end to their airs. Since then, no sources are reporting that the PML-N is considering not forming the government at the center, and just clinging to Punjab. (The questions over the north Punjab results do not just reduce their already miserable National Assembly number but also the majority on which Maryam Nawaz will stroll into the chief minister's house.) In the confusion, no one bothers to ask who designed and ran that uninspiring election campaign, which got them to the 80-seat mark in an election, where no one else was contesting. Considering they ran Islamabad directly since April 2022 and had a say in Punjab since the caretakers came in and still barely scraped through in the election, it is hard to imagine how they plan to reverse this trend by governing directly. But who dares ask difficult questions at this moment? The PPP continues to blow hot and scorn PML-N while forming committees and holding meetings for a power-sharing formula. (As an aside, I recently learned of 'breadcrumbing in relationships.) It is worth pondering why no one believes the PPP and is convinced it will end up in government yet again. Does it have something to do with the fact that after the son announced the tough decision taken in the party's two-day meeting, the other chairman suddenly appeared at a press conference of senior citizens who laid claim to government-making at the home of Chaudhry Shujaat? Perhaps, there is no greater sign of the times than the visuals of that press conference with the good Chaudhry seated in the middle. He headed the king's party of the 1990s. That PDM 2.0 (or the senior citizens club) is about to be revived is a triumph of hope over experience. This time around, it will manage the IMF and conduct reform while saving itself and the country from its perennial finance minister. Then we have the PTI, a party that maintains confusion among its ranks, whether there is one page or not, whether in power or opposition, and whether it is underground or not. Such consistency of confusion must be applauded, for the party rarely stays the course in any other field. It is claiming a marvelous result in the election (the dominant view on social media) and the governments at the center, and in Lahore and Peshawar, even though it still does not have a symbol (of any party) after having held talks with nearly every religion-political party other than the TLP. Also, choosing a general for a chief minister, it is indicating that it's ready for a face-off, with KP as its fortress. The confusion within it is only bound to increase as access to its leader is restricted and the lawyers and politicians figure out how to proceed. But with Sheikh Waqas Akram, Ali Mohammad Khan, Latif Khosa, and Sher Afzal Marwat leading the assault in the National Assembly, Shehbaz Sharif will for the first time in his life find out what an opposition is all about. It might just end up being a bigger surprise for him than 1999 when he was said to be sleeping as his brother chose a new COAS. In all of this, one can only hope we will bury the myth — among many others — of an election bringing about stability and quiet. That old 'analysis' is about as relevant as a text message, and it should be dropped along with the caretaker government (one waits with bated breath), as we brace ourselves for not just PDM 2.0 but also instability pro max. On February 20, 2024, the PPP and the PMLN reached a formal agreement to form a coalition government, ending ten days of intense negotiations after an inconclusive national election did not return a clear majority. Shehbaz Sharif, the younger brother of Nawaz, would be the coalition's candidate for prime minister. The delay in forming a government has caused concern as Pakistan is grappling with an economic crisis amid slow growth and record inflation, rising militant violence, and needs a stable administration with the authority to make tough decisions.

According to Pakistan's constitution, a session of parliament must be called by February 29 after which a vote for a new prime minister will take place.⁵²

The deal between two Pakistani parties to form a coalition government will be based on conditional support from one of them, the PPP, which will review decisions on a case-by-case basis. Such an arrangement could make life difficult for the government, which needs to make tough decisions to steer the country out of financial crisis facing a strong opposition bloc led by supporters of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan.

The agreement between the PPP and the ended days of uncertainty and negotiations after an inconclusive election.

But the PPP is not taking cabinet positions, its secretary of information, Faisal Karim Kundi, told Reuters, and its support in parliament would depend on the party's stance.

The most challenging task is to agree on critical fiscal tightening conditions under a new International Monetary Fund (IMF) program.

The current IMF program expires in March.

Other big moves include the privatization of loss-making state-owned enterprises such as the flagship carrier Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

Kundi said the PPP would not support the privatization of the airline, while the PML-N would want to fast-track it.

In return for supporting the formation of government by PML-N, PPP will seek the offices of the president, chair of the upper house of the parliament, and governors in two of the four provinces, he said.

Markets on February 21, 2024, reacted positively to the news of an alliance, which removed days of uncertainty. Pakistan's benchmark share index rose 1.81%. The index had fallen more than 5% since the elections.

Pakistan bonds recovered after three straight days of falls. The December 2027 bond was the biggest gainer, rising 2.58 cents, closely followed by the April 2031 bond which rose 2.54 cents.

PML-N's 79 and the PPP's 54 seats together make a simple majority in parliament to form a government, which, however, will also rope in smaller parties in the coalition.

Candidates backed by Imran Khan won 93 seats, but do not have the numbers to form a government. He and his party have rejected the results of the elections, alleging widespread rigging.

On February 21, 2024, the PPP official said that the deal between it and the PMLN to form a coalition government will be based on "conditional support" and that the party "will review decisions on a case-by-case basis". The PPP is not taking cabinet positions, and its support in parliament would depend on the party's stance. In return for supporting the formation of government by PMLN, the PPP will seek the chair of the upper house of the parliament, offices of the president, and governors in two of the four provinces.⁵³

This arrangement could make life difficult for the new government, which needs to make tough decisions to steer the country out of the fiscal crisis facing the nation. The most challenging job facing the new government shall be to agree on critical fiscal tightening conditions under a new International Monetary Fund (IMF) program. The current IMF program expires in March.

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Pakistan bonds recovered after three straight days of falls. The December 2027 bond was the biggest gainer, rising 2.58 cents, closely followed by the April 2031 bond which rose 2.54 cents.

The combined seats of the PMLN and the PPP' make a simple majority in parliament to form a government, which, however, will also rope in smaller parties in the coalition.

Candidates backed by Imran Khan won 93 seats, but do not have the numbers to form a government. He and his party have rejected the results of the elections, alleging widespread rigging.⁵⁴

Today, the issue of election rigging is causing political tensions in the country. In an article entitled “ An Election Shatters the Image of Pakistan’s Mightiest Force” published in the New York Times, on February 21, 2024, said that “Pakistanis once thought of the military as the iron hand behind the country’s politics. That idea has been broken, threatening the establishment.”⁵⁵

The election is now definitely controversial because of the alleged widespread rigging. The US on February 20, 2024, reiterated that claims of interference in recent general elections in Pakistan should be investigated. The US Department of State spokesperson, Matthew Miller, said:⁵⁶

Any claims of interference or fraud should be fully and transparently investigated ... That’s a matter I leave for Pakistan but as I said when it comes to any claims of interference or allegations, we want to see those fully investigated.... We always want to see Internet freedom around the world including the availability of platforms that people use to communicate with each other.

After the PMLN and the PPP announced to formation of a coalition government in the Centre, the PTI has warned of the ‘worst political instability’ ahead if the nation was forced to accept the “slavery of criminals.” The PTI said “We reject the entire drama of PDM 2.0 after gathering mandate pilferers. The nation gave the mandate to the PTI in the Centre, Punjab, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), with a clear majority of 180 seats. The party will resist using all platforms against the theft of the public mandate. Decision-makers must give the majority party its due right to form its government.”⁵⁷

On February 21, 2024, the PMLN continued its efforts toward government formation by striking agreements with various coalition partners following a recent power-sharing accord with the PPP).

PMLN representatives engaged with delegations from the MQMP, BAP, and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), solidifying their alliances and outlining plans for governance.

It was disclosed that the PMLN and MQMP have reached a consensus to collaborate within the government framework. The agreement underscores a commitment to foster reconciliation and cooperation, with a focus on enhancing political, democratic, and economic stability across the nation.

Central to their discussions was the imperative of ensuring equitable distribution of resources and powers, laying the groundwork for future deliberations on critical issues such as the protection of urban rights in Sindh, particularly in Karachi, and the restoration of the port city's economic prominence.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the Sindh High Court (SHC) has ordered the restoration of all social media apps, including X (formerly Twitter) while hearing petitions against the shutdown of internet services on election day in the country.

A two-member bench, headed by Sindh High Court Chief Justice Aqeel Ahmad Abbasi, heard the petitions on February 21, 2024, expressing concern over the widespread shutdown of internet services during the crucial election period.

The government's fear of dissent forced it to take X as a threat and shut it down without giving any reasons.

It is not the only one, as other social media applications, cellular services, and the internet frequently face blackouts, leaving from the president to experts and media to the common person to question the unannounced disruption and dub it an attempt to silent dissent. The chief justice made sarcastic remarks directed at the public prosecutor, commenting on the alleged irregularities in the election process.⁵⁹

The proposed new government looks much the same as the shaky coalition that combined to oust Khan in a no-confidence vote in 2022 when Sharif became prime minister for the first time. The PTI has valid reasons to lash out against the PDM 2.0 government agreement and the reiteration of its accusations of foul play. The issue of election rigging is profoundly serious and is tearing the nation apart. Therefore, it must be examined thoroughly and rectified immediately, to the extent possible.

Today, amid rigging allegations arising out of the elections, Pakistan finds itself in a political crisis yet again. The country also faces serious economic and security challenges with no easy solution in sight. The new Sharif government will have to face these challenges head-on to avert political chaos and anarchy in the country. However, the new Sharif government is a déjà vu of earlier failed democratic experiments by the Pakistan military. From a hybrid democratic system, Pakistan has descended to an authoritarian system of governance much like the Central Asian republics and the many Mukhbara states in the Middle East. There is little hope for a transformation of Pakistan from an authoritarian system towards even a semblance of democracy.

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