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[Home](#) > Pakistan's Sham Election

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Pakistan's Sham Election

How the Army Chose Imran Khan

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Newcomers to Pakistani politics greeted the outcome of Wednesday's general election—an apparent victory for former cricket star Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party—with optimism. They were quick to note that Pakistani authorities focused on increasing female participation, both as candidates and as voters ^[1]. (Although women have had the right to vote since the country came into existence in 1947, cultural norms ^[2] have often denied them the right to cast their ballots ^[3].) *The Wall Street Journal* gushed that Khan's apparent victory will “break the country's two-party system.” ^[4] Others wondered whether his election will have salubrious effects on Pakistan's shambolic economy ^[5], foreign policy ^[6], or internal security ^[7].

Those of us who have watched Pakistan for decades, however, viewed the election with a more jaundiced eye. It was marked by appalling levels of electoral violence ^[8], including an election day suicide bombing in Quetta that killed at least 31. Second, the result was predetermined by Pakistan's powerful army, which engaged in electoral malfeasance ^[9] for months leading up to the election and on election day itself. ^[9] The army was hell-bent upon securing Khan's victory and even encouraged political parties with overt ties to terrorist groups to field several hundred candidates, alongside some 1,500 candidates tied to Pakistan's right-wing Islamist parties. These right-wing groups will help forge Khan's electoral coalition, underwritten by Pakistan's army and the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the intelligence agency that does the army's dirty work at home and abroad.

Predictably, this election, like virtually every previous election in Pakistan, will have few consequences for Pakistan's behavior at home or abroad. This is because the power to alter these policies resides in the army's general headquarters in Rawalpindi, not in the parliament or prime minister's office in Islamabad.

SADIQ AND AMEEN

The army has directly controlled Pakistan through dictatorship for 30 years of the country's history and indirectly controlled it for the rest. Thanks to the army's various ruses, no democratically elected prime minister has completed his or her term. Throughout the 1990s, the army asserted its authority through the use of a constitutional amendment, Article 58-2(b) ^[10], introduced by Pakistan's third military dictator, Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, which allowed the president to dismiss the parliament and state assemblies. During periods of military rule, the president was the army chief. During periods of civilian rule, the army allied with the president. The army lost this power in 2010, when President Asif Ali Zardari promulgated the 18th Amendment ^[11], which removed the president's power to dissolve the parliament, once again rendering Pakistan a parliamentary democracy led by a prime minister.

Yet the army soon cultivated new methods of undermining civilian governance, including ISI-sponsored mass protests ^[12] and collaboration with Pakistan's Supreme Court ^[13]. Despite the tendency of some analysts to praise the court ^[14], it has in fact consistently colluded with the deep state over the course of Pakistan's troubled history, principally by supporting the country's various military coups ^[15].

In this election, the court was instrumental to the army's scheme to elect Khan. In August 2017, in response to a corruption investigation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif spearheaded by Khan, the Supreme Court ousted Sharif by declaring him neither *sadiq* (truthful) nor *ameen* (honest), disqualifying him from holding office under Article 62 ^[16] of the constitution. (This despite the admission ^[17] by one of the justices that the constitution leaves *sadiq* and *ameen* undefined.) The court also used Section 99(f) of the Representation of the People Act of 1976, which permits a person to be disqualified if he or she is not “sagacious, righteous and non-profligate.” Sharif was subsequently banned from politics for life and arrested along with his daughter.

Although Khan benefited from this new tool, he will have to watch his back. Khan has not proven his fealty to the army, and given the allegations circling him about [corruption](#) ^[18] and [cocaine use](#) ^[19], the latter of which is a capital crime in Pakistan, he will be vulnerable to similar attacks should he disappoint his masters.

THE WRATH OF KHAN

The army has a long history of selecting Pakistan's prime minister or at least creating the conditions to ensure that an undesirable prime minister can be easily removed. This time around, the army's pickings were slim. It has a well-known antipathy toward the Pakistan Peoples Party, led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, which has at any rate become little more than an ethnic party confined to its stronghold in Sindh.

Ironically, the army's *bête noire* in this election, Nawaz Sharif, was himself the political Frankenstein of Zia-ul-Haq. During his first term as prime minister in 1990–93, Sharif was a pliant stooge of the army, but he grew more independent during his second term in the late 1990s, even mustering the audacity to sack an army chief in 1998. Taken by surprise, the army kept its powder dry until October 1999, when Sharif sought to oust General Pervez Musharraf over his role in the Kargil War with India earlier that year. The army mobilized immediately to depose Sharif, who escaped with his life only after agreeing to go into exile in Saudi Arabia, returning after the United States and United Kingdom helped broker the so-called National Reconciliation Ordinance of 2007.

In the 2013 elections, Sharif surprised everyone, including the army, when his Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party secured a landslide victory that brought him to power without the help of a coalition. The army was angered by Sharif's campaign speeches, in which he oppugned nearly every one of the army's shibboleths, vowing to accept Afghanistan as a neighbor rather than force it to become a pliant client state, normalize relations with India, and increase civilian control over the army. Although these actions alone would have put a giant target on the back of his woolen vest, he had the audacity to insist on Musharraf standing trial for treason for suspending Pakistan's constitution after the 1999 coup. There was never any chance that Sharif could enact these policies, but his rhetoric was enough for the army to begin thwarting his ability to govern from his earliest days in office.

While it worked to undermine Sharif, the army also started cultivating the only political option it had left: Khan and his PTI party. Khan has been a politician for decades, but his earlier electoral performances had been disappointing. To make matters worse, he had previously refused to play [Pakistan's political game](#) ^[20] of alliance forging and deal making and had taken rhetorical stances against the military, accusing the army of "[selling our blood for dollars](#) ^[21]," in an apparent criticism of its relationship with the United States. Since 2013, however, Khan seems to have accepted the reality that he lacked the national appeal to win on his own without the support of the army. He began to [praise the military](#) ^[22], and the military reciprocated.

The army and the ISI worked relentlessly to [improve Khan's political prospects](#) ^[23]. The ISI helped fund his rallies ^[24] throughout the country and shape him into a winning candidate. The military persuaded [politicians from other parties](#) ^[25] to defect to PTI along with their voters, leading many to refer to the party as the "Pakistan Turncoat Industry." The army [bullied the press](#) ^[26] into providing PTI with positive coverage while attacking the PML-N. The security apparatus [rounded up](#) ^[27], detained, and otherwise harassed PML-N party workers, and the army worked behind the scenes to disqualify PML-N candidates from running. In the most appalling and craven move yet, the army facilitated the rise of three political parties with [ties to terrorists](#) ^[28], including a political front for Lashkar-e-Taiba, a jihadist group that committed the November 2008 attack on Mumbai; [the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, which has ties to the Islamic State](#) ^[28] (also known as ISIS); and the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Labbaik, whose single position is the strict enforcement of the country's [controversial blasphemy law](#) ^[29] (numerous people in Pakistan, many of them religious minorities, have been [murdered](#) ^[30] over the mere allegation of offending the Prophet). These parties are expected to side with Imran Khan.

IN THE ARMY NOW

Not all of the votes are counted yet—and the other political parties are already [filing complaints](#) ^[31] with the election commission over outrageous and blatant rigging—but it is already certain that Khan will be the next prime minister. The only remaining uncertainty at this juncture is the precise composition of his coalition and the number of legislators tied to right-wing Islamist and even terrorist parties. Although some Pakistanis are elated with Khan's election and sincerely believe that he is a face for change, reality will soon settle in.

Ultimately, the election will mean little for Pakistani policies at home or abroad. The army will call the shots on the country's relations with Afghanistan, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The army will continue to prosecute its proxy wars in Afghanistan and India. It will continue to cultivate terrorists who work on its behalf while weeding out those who have turned on their erstwhile patrons.

Khan's room for maneuver will be very constrained. He can make noise that is supportive of the army's policies or he can generate friction against them. If he becomes a liability, the army will undermine him just as it has the other politicians that it has propped up only to knock down. In Pakistan, it is the army that ultimately wins elections.

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Links

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