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Pakistan

# Pakistan elects mini-Trump in military-rigged elections

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**First off, some simple arithmetic about the July 25 general elections in Pakistan, the sixth most populous country in the world. In a house of 342, 272 members are directly elected. The rest of the seats are reserved for women and religious minorities allotted on the basis of the parliamentary representation every party achieves in the elections. In the polling conducted on the British pattern of first-past-the-post system, the Pakistan Justice Party (PTI) pocketed 115 out of 272 seats (up from 26 in 2013) and emerged as the largest party. For a simple majority, the PTI required 137 mandates. Hence, a coalition government has been constituted.**

Second-placed Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), that ruled Pakistan during the previous term from 2013-18, was reduced to 64 (from 126 in 2013). The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by the late Benazir Bhutto's widower, Asif Zardari, bagged 43 seats (slightly improving its 2013 tally of 33) as the third largest party. The rest of the seats were won by various small parties and independents including a grassroots Marxist activist, Ali Wazir. The MMA (United Council of Action), a coalition of fundamentalist parties, won 11 seats.

On July 25, voters also voted to elect the four provincial assemblies. While the PTI and the PMLN won almost equal number of seats (PMLN: 127, PTI: 125) in the largest province of Punjab, PPP won a comfortable majority in Sindh province, the second largest in terms of population and the home province of Bhutto dynasty. In Khayber Pakhtoonkhwa (KP) province, PTI retained its simple majority. In Balochistan, largest in land mass but smallest in population, no party was able to command a clear majority, a pattern established since the first general elections in 1970.

Though the election outcome – marred by credible rigging charges (discussed below) hence ridiculed by critics as General Selections – offer a flicker of hope for the left yet the overall outcome is disappointing for country's democratic transition.

Through a military-rigged PTI victory, all powerful generals have staged a soft coup. The election results are disappointing also because a right-wing pro-Taliban and conservative party of the rich, PMLN, has been replaced by the PTI, another right-wing party of the rich with a similar agenda.

Meantime, the PPP, once a left-reformist project, has decisively shifted to the right. Hence, in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, electoral politics is presently largely a political wilderness from a progressive viewpoint. However, a PMLN victory would have subverted the domination of military. Irony of ironies, the PMLN, led by now-jailed former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, was catapulted to power in similarly rigged elections in 1990.

## The Rise and Fall of the Sharif Dynasty

Mr Sharif was patronised and cultivated as a politician by the Pakistan military to counter the PPP in the late 1980s. Benefitting from military patronage, Sharif not only established an industrial empire as a text book example of idiomatic crony capitalism but by the mid-1990s had founded a political dynasty. His brother, Shahbaz Sharif, was appointed as the Punjab Chief Minister in 1997 while other relatives were assigned positions of power.

Sharif's politics, a toxic mix of religious conservatism with a neoliberal agenda, helped him secure a base in the

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trading classes and urban petty bourgeoisie. Top corporate houses also benefitted as state assets were sold (gifted would be a more appropriate description) to cronies under the name of privatisation. Sharif's ability to politically sell his 'mega development projects' such as motorways and bullet trains (the latter luckily never materialised) as magic bullets capable of catapulting Pakistan to the status of an Asian Tiger, only consolidated his appeal among social classes he was trying to woo. Meantime, PPP's embrace of a neoliberal agenda and political capitulations demobilised sections of the working classes and a general atmosphere of depoliticisation only benefitted Sharif. In 1997, he managed a two-thirds majority to become Prime Minister a second time.

However, every time he held the office as a prime minister (1990-93; 1997-99; 2013-17), serious differences with the military cut short his tenure in the office. In 1999, after the military coup led by General Musharraf, Sharif was initially jailed and later – thanks to his good relations with Saudi dynasty – he was exiled to Riyadh along with his entire family (parents, siblings, children).

In 2007, when a mass democracy movement led by lawyers, known as the called advocates movement, humbled Gen Musharraf, the Sharifs returned to the country. However, the PMLN lost national elections to the PPP but gained a majority in the Punjab. Shahbaz Sharif, as Chief Minister, formed the provincial government and once again Sharifs were able to promote certain mega projects as a sign of their development agenda.

Meantime, the federal PPP government, spearheaded by Benazir's notorious widower as President of the country (even though the constitutional power lies with the prime minister), was making itself scandalously unpopular through its inefficiency and corruption.

Symptomatic of PPP's inefficiency and corruption was country's electricity crisis. There were hours-long power outages on a daily basis (called load-shedding in Pakistani parlance) intermittently spanning over eight to twelve hours. The Sharifs promised to end load-shedding, which had seriously undermined an already poor industrial production besides making daily lives hell. The Sharifs ability to sell mega dreams won them a simple majority, largely in Punjab, in the 2013 elections. While the younger brother continued as the Punjab chief minister, Nawaz himself was back as Prime Minister for the third time.

While he had estranged the military in the past and was hence a suspect in the eyes of generals, his attempts to normalise relations with India and his efforts to assert civilian supremacy in the matters of foreign policy and economy further antagonised the Pakistan Army's General Headquarters (GHQ).

Through the courts, the military managed to get him disqualified as prime minister in 2017, ten months short of his mandated five-year term. It is not that he was not corrupt. Pakistani politicians and generals often make headlines for their gigantic corruption scams and the Sharifs are no exception. However, Sharif's disqualification was seen by his supporters and many others in the country as a vendetta. He now sits in jail on corruption charges, along with his daughter, Maryam Nawaz Sharif.

While the military-judiciary alliance in Pakistan has historically collaborated to undermine democracy, this time, however, PTI leader Imran Khan, a Pakistani version of Donald Trump, was deployed as a tool to lodge and pursue the corruption cases against Sharif. As a reward, the military rigged elections to ensure a PTI victory. But before a brief on rigging and PTI's politics, a note on Pakistan's military is called for here.

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# Wherever you look, the Army

Pakistan can be described as a praetorian state. In this state, the military is the most organised political party that has intermittently ruled the country for about forty years since independence in 1947. It is the largest business conglomerate with stakes in industry, education, tourism, health, retail and banking sector. As an institution, it also is the largest feudal lord in an agrarian country. Of late, it has developed an interest in media and cultural industries and effectively controls the mainstream discourses.

Space will not allow me to adequately delineate Pakistan military's diverse economic and political ventures. The revolutionary poet, Ustad Daman, who was jailed by successive military dictators, aptly summed up the military domination of Pakistani polity long ago:

Pakistan diya mouja ee mouja

Jidhar waikho fouja ee fauja

(Everyday is fair and balmy.

Wherever you look, the Army).

On sensing Sharif's victory in 2013 elections, the military started cultivating Imran Khan, a former cricket star who captained the Pakistani side that won the Cricket World Cup in 1992. Post-retirement, Khan turned to philanthropy which further contributed to his celebrity status.

In 1997, he launched the PTI but remained isolated until 2011 when all of a sudden he began to pull huge crowds. Many suspected a military hand behind his sudden popularity. However, reducing his popularity to the military's manipulation would be a poor analysis.

Large sections of the urban middle classes in white collar jobs, in particular young people (70% of the population is below 30), were disillusioned by both the PPP and the PMLN. While the PMLN has a support base among traders and petty bourgeoisie besides a wide network of patronage in Punjab, jobless educated youth with university degrees and professionals (doctors, engineers, advocates, teachers, clerks, militarymen) feel marginalised by the PMLN. It is true that the PMLN and the PTI have similar economic and social agenda but command a rather different social base. Also, while PMLN enjoys popularity in Punjab alone, the PTI is popular in the KP province and amongst the urban middle classes in Sindh as well. Most importantly, simplistic PTI discourse that corruption is the mother of all ills and the PTI would rid Pakistan of corruption has struck a chord with its social base.

However, in 2013 Imran Khan's growing popularity placed his PTI in the parliament only on third place (28 mandates) slightly behind the PPP (36 mandates). The PTI did manage to secure a majority in KP province but its performance as a provincial government was at best mediocre.

Meantime, the PMLN government did not perform any better. Yet, the PMLN base did not erode radically. To its credit, the PMLN government rather successfully solved the electricity crisis while the law and order situation also improved in terrorism-hit Pakistan (for the latter, the PMLN can not be credited though). The PMLN looked all set to win 2018 elections. To subvert any such possibility, the military intervened decisively to rig the elections.

## Rigging as usual

Ironically, the military is too uncreative to introduce new methods of rigging but resorted to time-tested schemes. First gerrymandering was employed to target the PMLN and the media were coerced to support the PTI. Traditional politicians capable of winning their constituencies, the so-called 'electables', were convinced to join the PTI. Next, the PMLN candidates were forced to change their loyalties. Finally, on the polling day, over three-hundred thousand military men were stationed at the polling stations to ensure peaceful conduct of the elections. However, in at least 50 constituencies, the routine vote-counting processes were not followed. An eerie delay of two days in election results lent further credibility to the charges of rigging. Not only the PMLN and the PPP have refused to accept the results as credible, many smaller parties have termed the election results fake. Despite media censorship, reports of mass irregularities have been reported by a section of press.

While a clear evidence of post-polling rigging has neither emerged nor will emerge anytime soon owing to a number of technical factors, the factor of pre-poll rigging is well-established and acknowledged by an EU mission that observed the electoral process. Ironically, Khan has contested four elections on the platform of anti-corruption. However, he has come to power through a rigged election as if rigging is not corruption.

## Khan's politics

This irony also reveals the hollowness of his anti-corruption crusade. Practically, he has employed anti-corruption sloganeering only to flog his political opponents, notably the Sharfis and the Zardari-Bhutto clan. He never speaks of institutional corruption by the military, judiciary, bureaucracy or the corporate corruption. He refused to remove his billionaire PTI deputy, Jahangir Tareen (who bankrolls PTI politics), when he was disqualified as a member of the parliament on corruption charges in a similar fashion to which Sharif was convicted.

On the economic front, he has a boring neo-liberal agenda. But most dangerously, he is a Taliban sympathiser. The PTI provincial government not merely built a coalition government with Jamaat-e-Islami, it provided lavish financial support to a seminary considered as the Oxbridge of the Taliban.

Khan is a misogynist to the core. Recently, he claimed feminism undermines motherhood. In the past, as a parliamentarian he has opposed the Women Protection Bill that was aimed at providing relief to rape victims. In one case, a woman PTI parliamentarian accused him of sexual harassment.

He is viewed with suspicion by oppressed religious minorities. Symbolic of his anti-minority stance is his support for the blasphemy laws that have been dangerously deployed by religious fanatics not merely to literally lynch members of religious minorities but recently for political gain.

Most importantly, he has brutalised political culture. He does not merely employ verbal abuse (recently declaring PMLN supporters as 'donkeys'), but his party has cultivated an army of trolls that harasses any critic of Khan/PTI on social media. From rape threats aimed at women to death threats, every form of abuse has been deployed to malign critics. And it is not merely xenophobia, misogyny, religious conservatism, and sexual harassment that liken him to Donald Trump. He is also generous with facts.

But amid all the gloom described above there is a hope as country's miniscule but expanding left has made history in this election.

# The Left makes History

In the past, a few self-styled Marxists managed to win parliamentary mandates standing for leftwing parties such as the PPP and the National Awami Party (NAP). However, Ali Wazir, made history when he scored a victory on July 25 as an independent. Months ahead of July 25 elections, he began to make national headlines as the leader of a grassroots movement, the Pashtoon Defence Movement (PTM), that emerged in the tribal regions bordering Afghanistan. This region has been a stronghold of the Taliban. His opposition to the Taliban has resulted in the assassination of over ten members of his family, including siblings and uncles.

The region has also been subjected to brutal military operation against the Taliban. Most importantly, it has been an arena for Pakistan's double game in Afghanistan. These events have led to devastation and mass displacement of local communities. A few months ago, a mass movement on the PTM platform emerged in this region to register protest against the military excesses. Ali Wazir was one of PTM's key leaders. He won the elections in 2013 too but after initial announcement of his victory, the Election Commission announced re-polling in his constituency and through rigging in he was denied the victory.

However, given his mass popularity, he not only won his seat this time but another PTM leader, Mohsin Dawar, also managed to win a seat. There are at least two progressive voices in the present parliament.

Beyond the tribal region, the left fielded over fifty candidates. While the president of Peoples Workers Party (AWP), Fanoos Gujjar, scored over 11000 votes, other leftwing candidates ran spirited election campaigns and for the first time in three decades, the left was able to register a presence even if on the margins.

## Conclusion

For the first time in Pakistan's history, two consecutive governments have been changed by way of elections. In many cases, this would have been seen as a case of democratic transition. However, through PTI's rigged election victory, the Pakistan military has staged a soft coup. Therefore, a civilian ascendancy does not seem to enter into the civil-military configuration; a necessary condition for Pakistan's democratic transition.

The jacked-up PTI victory, however, cannot be attributed to military's sleight of vote-counting hand. Pakistani youth, the PTI's mainstay in terms of support, is desperate for a change. But the change promised by the PTI will only reinforce the status quo.

The PTI's Finance Minister, Asad Umar, has announced that he will privatise 200 state owned enterprises in order to secure an IMF bailout package. Secondly, PTI's victory is yet another instance of Trump-style populism's ability to sell neoliberal agenda in a period of acute economic, political and social crisis in the country. In the case of Pakistan, this agenda was disguised under an anti-corruption discourse.

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