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# Pakistan Focus Info

## Tension surrounding the 8 February general elections



### *A high-stakes election amid a poor political and security situation*

Following a **political crisis** of nearly two years, exacerbated by the **removal from office of former Prime Minister Imran Khan** (2018-2022), Pakistan is preparing to hold **elections** for its national and provincial assemblies **8 February**. Initially, the elections were scheduled to be held in November 2023, but were **officially postponed** due to delays in the “**re-delimitation**” of certain election constituencies. **The opposition saw it as a political manoeuvre by the military establishment** aimed at preparing the field for the victory of their favourite “loyalist” against the **Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf** (Pakistan Movement for Justice, **PTI**), Imran Khan ‘s party.

**The February 2024 elections will go ahead amid turmoil**, while the country is currently in the grip of **numerous crises**, notably an **economic recession** marked by **soaring inflation** (30%), the repeated **devaluation** of the national currency, **tension along its disputed borders** and a **rise in action by insurgent armed groups**, which have damaged relations with neighbouring **Iran** and **Afghanistan**.

**Instability has greatly strengthened the role and powers of the “deep state”** (the army and its powerful intelligence services), which is once more emerging as the **kingmaker in Pakistani politics**. **The army has considerably interfered in the preparation of the ballot** and the **growing number of incidents of political violence** (repression of the PTI; attacks targeting candidates) has cast serious doubts on the **fair and just nature of the election**. **There is a credible risk of destabilisation in Pakistan**, particularly if the election ends with the **potential defeat of the PTI** combined with **accusations of vote rigging**.

## *The PTI's losing battle against the military establishment*

In **April 2022**, less than four years after he became prime minister, **Imran Khan** resigned from office after he **lost of a vote of confidence** in relation to poor economic mismanagement, **a first in Pakistan's history**. He accused the army of having orchestrated his removal as part of an ongoing power struggle over the appointment of the head of Pakistan's powerful **Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)**. The PTI government was replaced by the **Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)**, a government coalition primarily comprising of the **conservative Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N)** and the **Pakistan People's Party (PPP)**.

In his resignation speech 9 April 2022, Imran Khan urged his supporters to take to the streets in order to stage mass protests. He launched a national **"long march"** from Pakistan's most densely populated province, Punjab, to the capital, Islamabad, **in demand of early elections**. **3 November 2022, an armed man opened fire on Imran Khan's convoy** leaving him injured and killing a PTI activist during a demonstration in the city of **Wazirabad, Punjab**. **The PTI supporters condemned the incident as an assassination attempt**. Imran Khan blamed the incident on the government and the army in power.

**The persistent tension between Imran Khan and the military establishment came to a head in May 2023 when the former head of government was arrested** on suspicion of corruption. His arrest triggered a **mass protest movement among PTI supporters**, which broke down into **violent incidents** in a number of cities (**repeated and large-scale attacks on government and military buildings, clashes with the security forces, roadblocks and vandalism**). **Never before in the country's history had the army been targeted in such a direct manner**. What is more, it was widely known that Imran Khan had managed to retain some support among the military, thereby fuelling at the time **rumours of a military coup** and the possibility of civil war. Imran Khan has always denied any involvement of his supporters in these events, accusing the army of orchestrating the violence in a bid to discredit him.



The crisis of May 2023 shook up the army, but ultimately ended in the return of authoritarian rule, led by the military with the full support of the ruling coalition led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif (2022-2023). As a result, the security forces stepped up their systematic crackdown on all opposition rallies, notably through the routine and excessive use of force, as well as by firing live rounds (**11 demonstrators killed nationwide**).

Meanwhile, the leaders of the PTI, confident that they had the support of the population, engaged in a trial of strength with the state apparatus - the army and its intelligence services, but also with the judiciary. They all emerged as losers from this showdown and ended up in prison or in exile, banned from running for political office. What is more, the powers of the army were strengthened through the passing of a series of pieces of legislation in the summer of 2023, making any attack on the army's facilities, interests or image a criminal offence.

After he was released on bail, Imran Khan was again arrested 5 August and sentenced to three years in prison for selling state gifts for personal gain. **By banning him from running for political office for five years, the conviction prevents the PTI leader, who remains the most popular politician in Pakistan, from standing in the upcoming elections.**



*A PTI supporter in front of a burning police vehicle in Karachi, May 2023*

Ultimately, this authoritarian turn has greatly weakened the PTI in the run up to the 8 February elections. **The crackdown has proved effective given that the PTI clearly lost its capacity to mobilise its supporters by the end of 2023** (about half as many supporters turned out for demonstrations in the last quarter of 2023 in comparison to the third quarter, and 90% less compared to the second quarter, according to ACLED).

Furthermore, the **PTI has suffered a drop in visibility during the election campaign**, notably due to a number of procedures and manoeuvres by the judicial and military establishment aimed at weakening the party (PTI candidates disqualified; cuts to internet services coinciding with the party's online campaigns; ban on holding political rallies; raids targeting political offices). **The party notably lost the right to use a cricket bat**, a historic symbol of the party and Imran Khan, as a **rallying sign** forcing the PTI candidates in the legislative and provincial elections to stand as **independents**. It is worth noting that in a country where 40% of the population is illiterate, the party's symbol is often the only way to distinguish the candidates from one another.

### *The “deep state”, an eternal kingmaker and heavyweight in Pakistan’s politics and economy*

Since Pakistan obtained independence in 1947, the army has directly controlled the country for more than three decades and continued to influence politics during civilian rule by selectively supporting leaders.

**Under the “hybrid regime” of recent years, the army was satisfied with arbitrating behind the scenes. Since the 2023 crisis and the showdown with the PTI, the army has become increasingly visible.** General **Asim Munir**, the current chief of army staff, no longer holds back from asserting himself as the sole master of the ship, in politics as much as in the economic sphere, intervening directly in monetary policy or in more unusual matters such as foreign investment from the Gulf monarchies or the diversion of electricity supplies.

**The army has succeeded its takeover of the country's economic and financial policy, at the clear risk of exacerbating endemic corruption:** all important decisions must be validated by the **Special Investment Facilitation Council**, controlled by the military. The steering committee replaces both federal ministries and provincial authorities. The army's takeover has enabled it to **defend its own interests** by **consolidating its huge financial empire** (urban and agricultural land-grabbing, real estate, the role of veteran foundations and economic conglomerates).

## *A deteriorating security situation weighing on the election, particularly in KP and Balochistan*

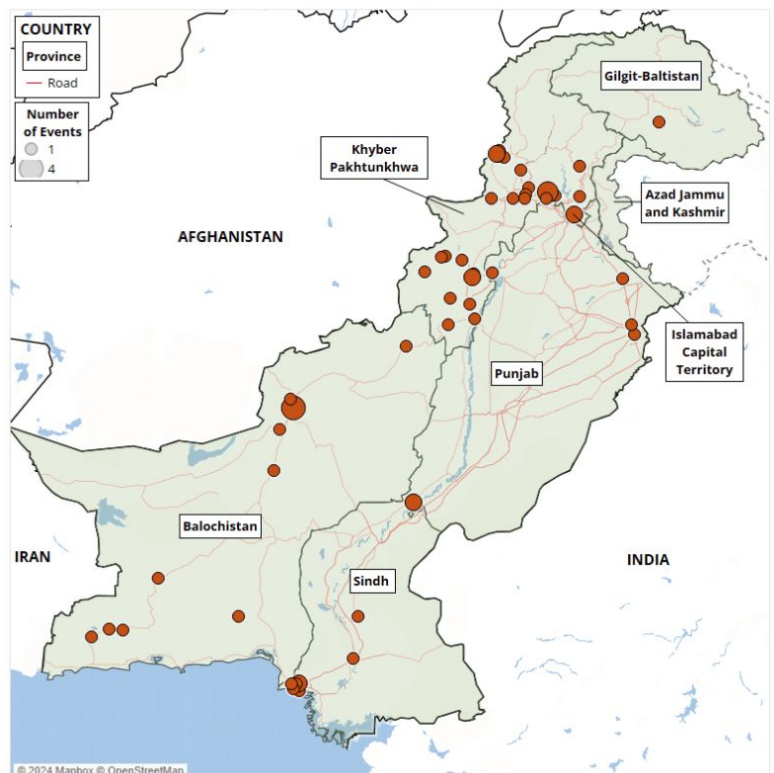
In general, election periods in Pakistan are marked by attacks by armed groups targeting political parties and candidates. Although the perpetrators, motives and targets of such attacks have varied, most of the violence has occurred in the provinces of **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)** and **Balochistan**. In 2023, it is estimated that **1,000** civilians and members of the security forces were killed, the highest number of casualties in such attacks for six years.

In **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**, the biggest threat is that posed by **Islamist armed groups** as they are continuing their violent campaign in demand of **greater autonomy in tribal regions** and the introduction of an Islamic political system across the whole of Pakistan. **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**, which ended its ceasefire with the Pakistani government in November 2022, is the most active of such groups and carries out **attacks on the security forces** on a regular basis.

Above all, **Balochistan Province** is facing a **historic separatist insurrection** and, to a lesser extent, the rise of **Islamist armed groups**. The **Baloch Liberation Front (BLF)**, one of the most active Baluch armed groups, and the **Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS)**, an alliance of the leading Baloch separatist groups, have called for a **boycott of the next elections, threatening anyone who might turnout**. To illustrate, at least 28 people were killed in two attacks on the political offices of candidates in Balochistan Province 7 February, less than 24 hours before the country would go to the polls.

### Armed Group Attacks on Political Party Members

1 January 2023 - 26 January 2024



One month prior to the February elections, ACLED recorded 24 attacks by armed groups targeting candidates or political parties standing in the elections. **This figure is comparable to that recorded before the 2018 elections, but markedly lower than the 100 plus incidents that were seen prior to the 2013 elections.**

### *Political outlook for the election: a weakened PTI in a challenger position, the PML-N a slight front-runner*

The upcoming elections will see a weakened PTI challenge the traditionally dominant parties in Pakistani politics - the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (**PML-N**) and the Pakistan People's Party (**PPP**).

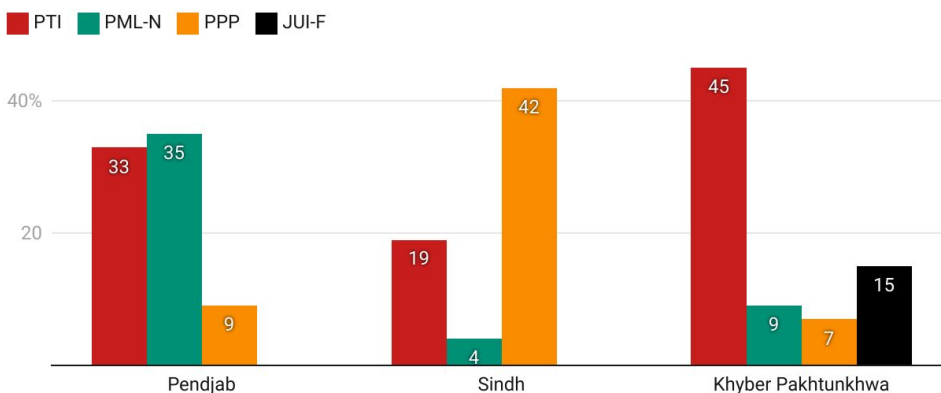
In the last elections in 2018, former Prime Minister Imran Khan was considered the favourite of the army, which surely was a decisive form of support in his victory. **In 2024, the alliances have reversed. Nawaz Sharif** (prime minister 1990-1993; 1997-1999; 2013-2017) **of the PML-N, who had been on bad terms with the army for a long time, appears to be back in favour and is now the frontrunner to win the February elections.**

**Nawaz Sharif recently returned to Pakistan following four years in self-imposed exile** in London after he was convicted in a corruption case. At the start of January, Pakistan's Supreme Court quashed the lifetime ban preventing individuals with criminal convictions from standing in the elections, **thereby opening the way for Nawaz Sharif's return to office.**

According to a poll carried out by Gallup Pakistan in December 2023, the difference in voting intentions between the **PML-N and PTI has slowly but surely become narrower over the last eight months.**

## 8 February general elections

Voting intentions for the main parties according to Pakistani province



*There are no figures available for Balochistan Province*

Chart: Scutum Security First (SSF) • Source: Gallup Pakistan • Created with Datawrapper

## Approval rate for the leaders of the main Pakistani parties ahead of the 8 February general elections




	Imran Khan (PTI)	Nawaz Sharif (PML-N)	Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (PPP)
			
Jun-23	60%	36%	36%
Dec-23	57%	52%	35%

Table: SSF - Scutum Security First • Source: Gallup Pakistan • Created with Datawrapper

As for the approval rate of leaders, Imran Khan is in the lead swiftly followed by Nawaz Sharif at a national level. In Punjab, Nawaz Sharif is ahead of Imran Khan. **Between June 2023 and December 2023, the gap between Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif in terms of approval decreased significantly.**

### *Meanwhile the economy is on the brink of collapse*

Pakistan is in the grip of an acute economic crisis marked by a recession in 2023, when the country narrowly escaped defaulting on its debts. In July 2023, the country reached a 3-billion dollar bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over 9 months, which should expire in March 2024, when the new government elected in the February ballot will be sworn-in.

Although the bailout plan has replenished the state's coffers, it is likely to **stir up social conflicts**, in a country that has been hard-hit by **inflation** (annual inflation rate exceeding 30% in September 2023) and a general slowdown in the economy. In one year, the gross domestic product (GDP) has dropped from 6.1% to -0.3%, according to the World Bank. In both the manufacturing industry and services, companies are laying off workers in large numbers, thereby contributing to the **high unemployment rate** (10%) and **greater hardship** (40% of the population lives below the poverty threshold).



In such a situation of socio-economic decline, soaring prices of gas and electricity has fuelled social discontent, both among industrialists and ordinary users. Increased energy costs was one of the conditions negotiated with the IMF for the release of the new loan. What is more, the hefty energy bills are all the more unsustainable, for ordinary users as well as for entrepreneurs forced to resort to back-up generators, because it is coupled with prolonged power cuts, sometimes lasting up to sixteen hours a day.

**Popular protests resumed in September 2023.** A massive campaign of civil disobedience sprung up in the Azad Kashmir region and then spread to major cities, urging users to stop paying their electricity bills. Traders, businesses and individuals assembled in **Lahore, Rawalpindi, Karachi, Quetta or Peshawar** in order to burn their electricity bills and block the roads - **demonstrations which sometimes turned into riots.**

### *Young voters and the turnout rate: key issues in an uncertain ballot*

The younger generation of voters appears to be key in the election given that **44% of the electorate is under 35 years of age.** The PTI is this demographic's preferred party, which is partly explained by an electoral strategy aimed at winning their votes (campaign on social networks, etc.).

However, **the population's general mistrust of an election, which appears to be partly decided in advance, as well as the failure to change the political class, the corruption of candidates and parties, should work in favour of abstention, which has itself been enhanced by a short election campaign undermined by repression.** The frustration of PTI voters, as well as concerns regarding security in regions particularly at threat from the activities of insurgent groups, should also lead to a drop in the turnout rate in the elections. But above all, **the loss of confidence of many Pakistanis is expressed mainly through their exodus.** The accumulation of crises - political, economic but also environmental, in a country at the **forefront of climate change** - is fuelling the phenomenon: in the first six months of 2023, more than 800,000 candidates for exile left the country.

Meanwhile, surfing on his popularity, **Imran Khan is continuing to remain confident in his party's victory.** On the one hand, he has expressed confidence that the PTI would have a "surprise" in store on polling day and, on the other, he said that any election held in the current climate would be "a disaster and a farce". In addition, **it is likely that the election results could be contested, especially if the outcome of the ballot is unfavourable to the PTI, as expected.** However, it seems difficult to say whether or not such discontent could lead to another mass mobilisation among the PTI and related violence, in view of the army's grip on security in recent months. Furthermore, **any sign of internal unrest could result in the army using the issue of national security as a pretext to step up its hold on power.**

In any event, at the least the deteriorating political and security situation is likely to give rise to **violent incidents on the day of the election and when the results are announced**, despite considerable measures to boost security nationwide. In addition, **a poorly elected government because of a low turnout rate could also undermine its legitimacy, thereby destabilising the country all the more for years to come.**

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