



IPCS

INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

SPECIAL REPORT 195

# Previewing **Pakistan's** 2018 General Election

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# Synopsis

IPCS hosted a panel discussion on 12 July 2018 featuring four distinguished Pakistan experts—Rana Banerji, Sushant Sareen, Dr TCA Raghavan, and Dr Ashok Behuria—to deliberate the several factors likely to influence the trajectory of the Pakistani general election scheduled for 25 July 2018. This report contains short write-ups authored by the panelists based on their presentations at the discussion, followed by the Speakers' Roundtable and Q&A, both rapporteured by IPCS.

## Will the **military** and **foreign policy** influence voting in the 2018 National Assembly Election? Why?

**Rana Banerji**

Member, IPCS Governing Council;  
former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India

One must revisit the Pakistani military's strategic culture to understand their approach to the democratic process and general elections in Pakistan. The army regards itself as the guardian or supreme defender of the country's national interests and sovereignty; the only institution which has preserved the security and very survival of the nation against all odds. As a corollary, Pakistan's generals have, over the years, viewed civilian politicians with the utmost contempt. Civil-military dissonance has become a facet of Pakistan's every day politics. This attitude is described by various academics as the concept of 'The Warrior State' (*The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*, by TV Paul) or 'The Greedy State' (*Pakistan Army: Fighting to the End*, by C Christine Fair).

The Pakistani army's current aim is to maintain only a veneer or façade of democracy, with marginal adjustments, so as to appease an offended world community apprehensive of Pakistan's continuing role as a sponsor of safe havens for global terrorism. Another objective is to keep meeting the minimum conditions of getting financial aid from international donor agencies.

The army has repeatedly punished civilian politicians who have attempted to change the skewed /existing balance of power between civilians and the military, which leaves control of security, foreign and nuclear policy firmly under control of the former. In the 25 July elections, the army's interest will lie in not allowing a resurgent mandate to any political party or politician who could encourage them to tamper or tinker with this delicate balance. In achieving this task, the army has not been averse to using direct or indirect means, taking the help of a willing or pliable higher judiciary.

**Engineered Verdicts:** Secondly, the army has tried to engineer political trends. Fear of engineered electoral verdicts cropped up after the senate elections in March 2018. Though the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) had 33 seats in the 104-member upper house, the army manipulated elections behind the scene. Despite seemingly having better numbers, PML-N lost both posts, and opposition nominees, Sadiq Sanjrani and Saleem Mandviwala, were elected chairman and deputy chairman, respectively, at the nod of the 'miltablishment'. In the build up to the July 2018 National Assembly polls, this approach has manifested in the luring away of

'electable' feudals from the PML-N, forcing others to join the bandwagon of independents using the 'jeep' symbol or projecting a demand for a separate South Punjab province. Manipulated results in the National Assembly could see a three-way split perhaps, between the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), PML-N, and independents.

**'Mainstreaming' of Religious Parties:** Thirdly, the Army has encouraged proscribed outfits like the Jamaat-ud-Daawa (JuD) to consider joining the political mainstream. With this 'nudging', the JuD promptly floated a political party named the Milli Muslim League (MML). Though the Election Commission of Pakistan refused to register the MML as a political party, JuD candidates have nevertheless entered the 2018 electoral fray, fielding candidates on the Allahu Akbar Tehrik (AAT) platform. Some analysts interpret this development as a positive sign that Pakistan is trying to rein in its proxy by giving it a non-lethal domestic role that will allow the state to decommission its jihad function gradually. Enabling 'non-state actors' or 'good terrorists' to gain a toehold in Punjab politics could serve a dual purpose for the army, ostensibly absolving them from a perceived 'terrorist' image while helping fragment the vote. US-based academic, C Christine Fair of Georgetown University, rejects this thesis. Writing about JuD in her 2017 essay, [\*Jamaat-ud-Dawa: Converting Kuffar at Home, Killing Them Abroad\*](#), she argues that despite their political mainstreaming, JuD/Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) will likely remain valuable to their masters in the Pakistani Army and intelligence community, eschew violence within Pakistan while also offering the perquisite of loyally executing lethal attacks externally at their behest.

**Foreign Policy:** Foreign policy or India has not and will not figure as an issue in the 25 July elections. Politicians know they cannot hold any views or take any political initiatives in this arena which is not in consonance with the 'red lines' laid down by the army.

## How will **domestic factors** influence voting in the 2018 National Assembly Election in Pakistan?

**Sushant Sareen**

Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation (ORF)

An important factor in Pakistani elections are the so-called 'electables'. These are figures that have built a local base of support and have made a name in politics. All parties have 'electables', albeit in different numbers. Local actors also need to be of use to the electorate on an individual level. This means the person one elects needs to wield a certain influence over the local police station or the local courts to be able to assist one personally when necessary. In Punjab province, there are three main parties (groups) that have these key figures. The PML-N, the PTI, and now, those who have broken away from the PML-N and will contest the elections independently under the 'jeep' symbol.

In addition to the 'electables', winnability is an important factor. If a certain party looks more likely to win the elections, more people will begin veering towards this party. At present, this aspect favours the PTI over the PML-N, who are perceived to be on the backfoot. However, the PML-N could exploit the emotional factor. Emotional issues play an important role in elections as a pull factor and could cut across existing divides. Nawaz Sharif's illegitimate imprisonment is an important emotional issue. Another advantage for Nawaz Sharif is the fact that his party machinery is slightly better. This is important on the day of the elections, to mobilise support and get people to come out and cast their votes.

There is also a major youth vote in Pakistan today, as in the last elections. Although the general perception is that the youth vote will largely go to Imran Khan's PTI, this analysis could suffer from an urban bias. Not much is known of the votes of the youth in the villages, who will also play an important role. The youth factor is also closely linked to the social media phenomenon. WhatsApp is an important medium in Pakistan and could influence the elections.

Broadly, there has been a right-wing shift in Pakistani politics, which has opened the door to new Islamist parties like the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and the Milli Muslim League (MML). Based on the by-elections conducted last year, conventional wisdom suggests that these parties will snatch votes from the PML-N in Punjab. Another important factor is the *biradari* factor, which will continue to be important in Pakistani elections.

Finally, there is economic aspect, which has currently not played an important role in the electoral campaign.

## PTI's prospects and the role of **opposition** and **regional** parties

**Dr TCA Raghavan**

Member, IPCS Governing Council;  
former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan

Although Nawaz Sharif has been on the backfoot since last month, English language newspapers in Pakistan tend to overemphasise the damage done to the PML-N. Moreover, the fact that Pakistanis give preference to the underdog plays in Nawaz Sharif's favour, certainly in Punjab. Contrary to 2002, the PML-N has been able to weather the recent crises, which is indicative of the party's resilience. For Nawaz Sharif's main opponent, Imran Khan, this election is of critical importance. If he is unable to win the election, it could end up being his last. The PTI is expected to perform well in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) where the Awami National Party (ANP) has been decimated.

In 2008 and 2013, it was clear to observers as to who would win the elections. However, this time, it is not so clear. Several factors will play an important role during the elections.

First, the influence of the army in engineering the elections should not be overestimated. Historical accounts indicate that they have often failed to direct the elections towards their preferred outcome. Second, just like in previous elections, Pakistan's policy towards India has not featured as a topic during the electoral campaign. While one could argue that in 2008 and 2013 the bilateral situation between India and Pakistan was better and that therefore the topic could have been left undiscussed, this time there is no clear explanation for the India factor's absence.

Social media will be an extremely important factor in this election. With an electorate of 100 million of which approximately 50 per cent are in possession of a smartphone, the influence of social media should not be underestimated. Finally, in the long-term, this election has broken the 20-year historical cycle of coups taking place. Although at once stage it looked like a coup could be in the making, it did not materialise.

## PML-N's prospects and the role of opposition and regional parties

**Dr Ashok K Behuria**

Fellow and Coordinator, South Asia Centre, Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)

Pakistan is just days away from the 11th general election since 1971. Campaign trails left by various political parties suggest that there is a country-wide fervour propelling the electoral process, riding on the back of a hyperactive media on the one hand, and an over-indulgent social media on the other, trying to engender sympathy in favour of/against one party or another.

The trend captured by opinion polls (organised by [Gallup Pakistan and Pulse Consultant](#)) in May and June 2018 show PTI is closing the gap with the front-running PML-N very fast. According to Pulse-Consultant, PTI (30 per cent) has in fact overtaken PML-N (27 per cent). Interestingly, however, it has indicated PML-N continuing to lead over PTI in Punjab (43 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively). This signals PML-N's poorer performance in provinces outside Punjab, where PTI is likely to overtake PML-N. This could result in superior performance at the national level.

The 4 July [poll by Global Strategic Partners \(GSP\)](#)—the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) sentenced Nawaz Sharif to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment on 6 July—however, suggests that PML-N maintains a three percentage point lead over PTI (23 per cent to 29 per cent).

While pre-poll surveys in South Asia are not known to have predicted electoral outcomes correctly in the past, they do indicate the trend of political shifts and turns. In the present case, it shows that PML-N has managed to put up a brave fight in the face of the judicial and political reverses it has suffered in the run-up to the elections, with its top leadership disqualified for elections and then convicted for graft. There is also a perception that the PTI's upward mobility can be ascribed to the establishment (or as one may call it, the deep state—what Nawaz would call *khalai makhlooq* or the 'invisible hand'), which seems viscerally opposed to Nawaz and his party.

It is a fact that PML-N has not shown many cracks despite the fact that some dissidents using the 'jeep' symbol in the elections are being touted as being backed by the military to split up the PML-N vote base. It has shown remarkable patience and resilience in the face of the leadership's suffering at the hands of an unforgiving judiciary that is allegedly supported by powerful elements in the military and bureaucracy. There are many in Pakistan who would point to a judiciary-military-election commission nexus seeking to pull Nawaz's party down and anoint Imran Khan's PTI as the winning party in the elections.

The popular mood—as could be gleaned from the massive turn outs in the rallies organised by Nawaz Sharif and his daughter—would indicate that there is still significant support for PML-N. There is, after all, a perception that Nawaz is being targeted for a crime (corruption) which is a rather normal occurrence in Pakistan, and his victim image is likely to generate a fair amount of sympathy in his favour. Many commentators would argue that Nawaz's brother Shehbaz's success in delivering on his promises in Punjab, compared to PTI's failure in KP, is also another factor that may boost PML-N's electoral prospects.

At present, it would be too premature to write off PML-N as a political force. The PML-N is likely to put up a formidable fight and emerge as a major political force post the election. In the event of a hung house result, which is the most likely scenario after the 25 July election, PML-N would be in a better position to form a post-poll alliance with Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and other parties smaller than PTI.

With regard to other smaller regional and religious parties, the ANP is unlikely to vastly improve its performance in KP—it is not being allowed to run its campaign to its full potential because of continued attacks against it by the militants; the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), wracked by factionalism, is likely to suffer unprecedented setbacks this time. The anti-PPP, five-party coalition called the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) may marginally affect, rather than upend PPP's electoral fortunes in Sindh. In Balochistan, the Baloch Awami Party (BAP), formed by pooling together various Baloch parties, is likely to end up as a minor political player in what could be a fractured verdict in the province.

The religious political parties including the AAT, which is being used a surrogate for LeT, and the TLP may at best divide PML-N's conservative support base to a certain extent. They are not expected to put up any magical performance. However, in case of an unclear mandate, the re-launched coalition of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) may play a role in determining which party will form the government at the federal level.

Irrespective of whether the upcoming election results in a hung-house or the PML-N having a sliver of a chance to form the next government, power dynamics in Pakistan will not change, with the powerful establishment continuing to call the shots as far as Pakistan's foreign and security policies are concerned—which has major implications for India.

## Speakers' Roundtable and Q&A

- There are two types of WhatsApp groups within Pakistan that are making an impact on how the elections are viewed. One is pro-Nawaz Sharif and is primarily among the urban elite and middle classes, involving those sections of society that are affluent, articulate and intelligent—and this is expanding. The second is of the reverse category, one that is comprised of ex-army officials, retired officers and generals etc, who have been trying to play up Nawaz Sharif's corruption.
- The India factor is overplayed in the discourse. What was the key poll issue in 1997? The India factor figures somewhere in the background. While it is not unimportant, it is simply not an election issue. In 1997, the prime issue was Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari looting the country dry—a single point agenda. In 2002, the agenda was getting democracy restored in some form or another. The 2008 election was only about Gen Pervez Musharraf's ouster, and of the return of democratic forces. The 2013 election was only about energy crises. And 2018 is about Nawaz Sharif.
- If one looks at Imran Khan's body language now, it is not that of a person who is going to be 'crowned the King'. That says a lot about how he is positioning himself in the electoral circus. He is very anxious, very worried—and this shows in his public speaking.
- People say that in the last election, when the security situation was much worse, 100,000 policemen and security forces were employed to maintain law and order—this time, there are 700,000. This shows the interest the military has in this election.
- It is difficult to manipulate an electorate of over 100 million people. One can do so in some specific constituencies, or resort to pre-poll rigging—which is taking place—but cannot ensure that the followers/supporters of a particular candidate are prevented from casting their vote.
- Compared to the pre-election situation in terms of how much India figures in the popular debate, The frequency of India featuring as a factor in public debates drops sharply during election time, as opposed to the pre-election period. One reason is that the political consensus in this election is too strong to also foster disagreements.
- The left and what is called left-of-centre does not exist in Pakistan, and has not existed in a very long time. Traditionally, the PPP, because of the nature of certain worker and farmer organisations and the links the PPP has with them, has sometimes been regarded as the left-of-centre party. But at the national level, these categories do not amount to much. Whether

PML-N should be considered left-of-centre or right-of-centre is unclear, especially because the other parties are so far right. It would be interesting, however, to observe how the radical elements fare. They may muddy the waters in some constituencies but do not seem poised to do well otherwise. There certainly will not be a situation of drastic change, or something akin to jihadists storming the National Assembly and taking over.

- The ANP was supposed to be a leftist party. However, traditional left-wing politics in Pakistan is dead. The centre of politics has gone so far to the right that now PML-N is seen as a left-of-centre party. The left orientation is more in terms of whether a particular party is willing to stand up to the establishment on a variety of issues.
- Husain Haqqani's take is broadly true of Pakistani politics. There is some incremental change taking place, and civil society pressures do manifest. The army's relevant department meets every month and they do make course corrections. In their mind, so long as the overall control of certain key issues remains with them, they are willing to let other things go.
- There is insufficient data on how the middle class tends to vote. With regard to the voting patterns of soldiers, broadly, it is known that they have sympathy for PML-N. Perhaps their village elders may influence how they vote. However, the bottomline is that there is not enough data on whether being in the army conditions an electoral response.
- There is a paucity of empirical evidence on whether the middle class promotes fascistic or progressive tendencies.
- The rise of urbanisation could be a crucial factor in the election. The rate at which Pakistan is urbanising is a significant phenomenon, and urban factors in electoral politics operate very differently from how they operate in rural areas. Many of the traditional alliances begin to break down when people move to urban areas. While it is not known whether this phenomenon has become significant enough to impact voting patterns, it cannot be discounted in an overall analysis of factors influencing elections in Pakistan.
- The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) is not going to be in the rough and tumble of politics. One would have thought they would have played an important role in politics, but it is difficult to tell just yet as to how many votes they will get. There has however been a significant show of public support in their rallies. Many other parties have distanced themselves—ANP even issued a statement saying that none of their members could join the PTM.
- GDA does not appear poised to fare very well, given that they are trying to enter an alliance even with the MMA and the Pak Sarzameen Party (PSP). Will the PSP attract many voters, and will the boycott take place? Mustafa Kamal is not exactly the image of a popular public persona. Even if the boycott does not take place, Mujahid voters will probably be split between

even with the MMA and the Pak Sarzameen Party (PSP). Will the PSP attract many voters, and will the boycott take place? Mustafa Kamal is not exactly the image of a popular public persona. Even if the boycott does not take place, Mujahid voters will probably be split between the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) and PSP and others who may get a chance to sneak in.

- This election is a fight to the finish for the Sharif family. The Sharifs know the real import of losing this election, and the family is going to put on a united front, regardless of feuds within. If they do not put up a good fight, they are history. After all, fighting an election from jail is a powerful position to be in during election season.



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