

Amid charges of massive irregularities

Right-wing Islamic populist Imran Khan claims victory in Pakistan elections

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The former cricketer turned politician Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) are claiming victory in Wednesday's general election in Pakistan. Unofficial tallies show the PTI well ahead in the race, but likely to fall short of a parliamentary majority.

Meanwhile, the two other main contenders, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which led the outgoing government, and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), as well as numerous smaller parties are claiming there were serious irregularities in the vote.

Even prior to Wednesday's polling, there were mounting accusations that the military—which has directly ruled Pakistan for much of its history and continues to wield effective control over the country's foreign and security policies—was intervening in all aspects of the election process, and doing so to secure a PTI victory.

In an article published Wednesday as the initial accusations of irregularities were surfacing, the widely-read English-language daily *Dawn* commented, “Rigging has been alleged in many elections but, this time, the sheer scale of it is what casts a shadow on these elections.”

While the PML-N and PPP were suggesting that they may not accept the legitimacy of the election results, Khan went on television Thursday to claim victory. He called the ballot “the fairest” in Pakistan's history and delivered a series of vacuous, demagogic promises of more jobs and relief for the poor. Khan promised to create an “Islamic welfare state,” while vowing to “decrease all of our expenses” and to “safeguard” taxpayers' money.

Khan also promised “peace” and spoke of the need for a solution to the Afghan war and “mutually

beneficial” relations with the US. Historically, Islamabad was Washington's principal ally in South Asia. But over the past two decades the US has lavished strategic favours on Pakistan's arch-rival India, so as to build it up as a military-strategic counterweight to China. Last year US President Donald Trump threatened Pakistan with a massive downgrade of relations unless it implemented US war objectives in Afghanistan to the letter.

Khan called for improved relations with India, but added the caveat, “if their leadership also wants it.”

Khan presents himself as a born-again Muslim and anti-corruption campaigner. He has long courted the Islamist right, including by championing the country's draconian blasphemy laws and supporting the disenfranchisement of the several-million-strong Ahmadi religious minority.

Until the 2013 elections, Khan's PTI was an also-ran in Pakistani politics. He was able to gain popular traction by posing as an opponent of the US drone war in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and by exploiting popular opposition to the nominally “left” PPP-government, which imposed brutal International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity and acted as a satrap for Washington in the Afghan war.

Sections of the Pakistani press are trying to claim that the elections, only the second under a civilian government, attest to the strengthening of democracy in Pakistan.

In reality, voters confronted the intimidating presence of 370,000 soldiers deployed to ensure the “integrity” of the polls, compared to just 70,000 in the 2013 elections. Altogether about 800,000 security personnel were deployed to 85,000 polling stations. This comes

on top of the already widespread military occupation of Karachi, Balochistan and areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that were formerly part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

Despite this mobilization, a suicide bomber killed at least 31 people in Quetta, Balochistan, on Wednesday. The Islamic State has claimed responsibility. Initial reports of electoral violence elsewhere included firing and grenade attacks on polling stations in Balochistan and Sindh. A man died in a shoot-out between supporters of rival parties in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Serious allegations of election rigging were raised just hours after counting began. The PML-N president and its candidate for prime minister, Shahbaz Sharif, the brother of jailed ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, “rejected” the preliminary results. He said polling agents sent by his party to ensure proper ballot counting under the provisions of the election law were “expelled from the polling stations.”

“The first step was pre-poll rigging, then the polling was slowed down and no extension was given. And when the time for counting arrived, our polling agents were thrown out,” Sharif complained.

The co-leader and prime ministerial candidate of the PPP, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, tweeted: “My candidates complaining polling agents have been thrown out of polling stations across the country. Inexcusable & outrageous.”

Both the PPP and PML-N have raised suspicions over the delay in announcing results. The Election Commission has denied any irregularities, blaming the delay in the vote-count on a “technical glitch.”

Virtually all parties, other than the PTI, have complained that security forces impeded their campaigns.

Nawaz Sharif began his political career as a protégé of the Islamisizing dictator General Zia ul-Haq and was long seen as a close ally of the military-intelligence apparatus. However, they had a falling out in the late 1990s, and in 1999 Sharif was ousted by a military coup, ending his second term as prime minister.

The military successfully pushed back when, on Sharif’s return to power in 2013, he tried to assert civilian control over foreign and security policy.

In the twelve months preceding the election, Sharif’s enemies within an establishment that is notorious for its rampant corruption used evidence against him arising

from the Panama Papers to exclude him from Pakistani political life. In July 2017, the Supreme Court removed him from the prime ministership and stripped him of his National Assembly seat. Subsequently, Sharif was barred from public office for life and in early July, as the election campaign was entering full gear, jailed.

Sharif sought to turn the tables on his opponents by casting himself as a victim of the manipulations of the military and a martyr for democracy. But this has had little impact, given Sharif’s own record of collaborating with the military and imposing brutal IMF measures.

Everything indicates that Pakistan is entering a new period of political crisis.

Should Khan become prime minister, the legitimacy of his government will likely be under attack from the traditional governing parties from the day it takes office. The PML-N will no doubt see this as payback for Khan’s refusal to accept the results of the 2013 elections.

More importantly, the new government will be immediately confronted with a major economic crisis. The rupee has lost some 20 percent of its value, in US dollar terms, since the beginning of the year and the central bank has reserves equal to little more than two months’ worth of imports.

It is widely expected the new government will have to turn to the IMF for a bailout and will be tasked by it with imposing a new round of savage austerity measures.

In his Thursday “victory” speech, Khan said Pakistan’s “economy has never been so abysmal.”



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