

Pakistan to go to polls in elections stage managed by military

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After several months of delays and uncertainty, voters in Pakistan, the world's fifth most populous country, are to go to the polls in national and provincial assembly elections this Thursday, February 8.

The Pakistani state, above all its US-backed military, has a long history of manipulating elections through violence, intimidation and outright ballot-stuffing. However, the military has never before intervened so obtrusively to manage an election outcome.

The military's immediate targets are defrocked Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI, Pakistan Movement for Justice)—who, it is widely believed, would top the polls were they allowed to stand.

Khan, a right-wing Islamic populist, has been in jail for the past eight months on trumped-up charges of betraying state secrets and politically manipulated corruption charges. With the approach of the polls, the vise tightened. In the past week, he has been convicted and sentenced to 14, 10 and 7-year jail terms, for respectively illegally profiting off gifts given him in his official capacity, leaking state secrets and marrying his wife before 40 days had elapsed after her divorce.

The PTI, meanwhile, has been banned from contesting the elections under its own banner. Those of its leaders who are seeking election as independents have been the target of police raids, violence and other forms of intimidation.

Under conditions where Pakistan is being roiled by intersecting economic, geopolitical and political crises, the military and the dominant factions of the bourgeoisie have decided that any expression of popular will—however limited and distorted by the right-wing character of Pakistani establishment politics—cannot be permitted.

Recent months have seen a wave of popular struggles, against spiralling food prices (inflation reached 40 percent in November) and job cuts, as well as against “disappearances” and extra-judicial killings perpetrated by the military.

Had the constitution been followed, the elections would have been held in early November. However, the caretaker administration led by interim Prime Minister Anwar ul Haq Kakar, a man trusted by the military and notorious for his contempt for the plight of the masses and their basic rights, found various pretexts to postpone them. The additional three months have been used to intensify the repression against Khan and his PTI, better prepare the political wicket for the military's preferred prime ministerial candidate and, last but not least, press forward with the

implementation of a raft of highly unpopular IMF-dictated measures. These include massive cuts to energy price subsidies, tax increases and a crash privatization program.

The Pakistani military top brass, by all accounts, have sought to pave the way for the return to power of Nawaz Sharif, a three-time prime minister and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's leader-for-life. The scion of one of Pakistan's wealthiest families, Nawaz Sharif began his political career as the protégé of General Zia ul-Haq, the US-backed military dictator and arch-reactionary who in the 1980s spearheaded the “Islamization” of Pakistani politics and society.

Sharif, who last held the prime ministership from 2013-17, has had his share of run-ins with the military, which zealously asserts its control over the country's military, foreign and national-security policies. However, they have apparently patched up their differences with the PML (N) leader expected to head a government charged with “reviving” Pakistan's economy, that is boosting investment by slashing real wages, selling off public assets, and removing all regulatory restraints on capital.

In October, Sharif returned from the UK, where he had been living since 2019 to avoid jail on a corruption conviction. Within a matter of weeks, the courts overturned that conviction, threw out other charges against him and in January the Supreme Court struck down a lifetime ban on politicians convicted of corruption from standing for public office.

Sharif is campaigning as the candidate of “economic development,” while emphasizing his support for the military. He has repeatedly denounced Imran Khan for supposedly inciting opposition to the military, including his “catastrophic” role in the events of May 9, 2023, when PTI supporters outraged by Khan's seizure by para-militaries during a courtroom appearance clashed with security forces across the country.

“What Imran Khan did and what has happened to him is his own making,” Sharif told Geo News this week. “We made Pakistan an atomic power,” he continued in a reference to the country's 1998 nuclear-bomb tests. “We didn't attack our own army on 9th May. We are for peace and progress.”

With the PTI effectively disbarred from the elections, the PML (N)'s principal opponent is the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a dynastic party of capitalists and landlords. It is now led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of assassinated two-time Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and the grandson of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was deposed as prime minister and subsequently ordered hanged by

General Zia. The PPP once promoted itself as an “Islamic socialist” party, but whenever it has held office over the past four decades it has implemented IMF austerity and pursued close relations with Washington.

The PML (N) and PPP came together in a coalition government led by Sharif’s brother, Shahbaz Sharif, after Khan’s government was toppled in April 2022 in a parliamentary non-confidence vote orchestrated by the military and egged on by Washington. During its 15 months in office, the coalition government won the approval of the IMF, by imposing brutal subsidy and other budget cuts amid the devastation caused by the 2022 floods, and succeeded in mending Islamabad’s frayed relations with Washington. Among the Pakistani people, however, its support plunged.

The IMF, with which Pakistan’s government will almost certainly have to negotiate further loans given the country’s massive foreign debts, has indicated its preference for a “broad-based” government. That way the popular opprobrium for implementing brutal measures on behalf of Pakistani and global capital can be shared among the political elite, and none of the major parties can be tempted to try to politically benefit by posing as opposed.

However, given the historic bad blood between them, it is deemed unlikely the PPP will agree to again serve as the PML (N)’s junior partner in government.

The PTI is a right-wing, anti-working class party that consorts with various Islamic fundamentalist groupings. Khan owed his election in 2018 to the behind-the-scenes support he received from the military. Once in office, he quickly ditched his populist rhetoric about establishing an “Islamic welfare state” to impose one of the most brutal IMF austerity and restructuring programs ever implemented in Pakistan. Underscoring the real relations between his party, the military and the traditional political establishment, he staffed his cabinet with ministers and officials who had served under George W. Bush’s “war on terror” ally, the dictator General Pervez Musharraf.

If the military ultimately soured on Khan and greenlighted his ouster, it was because it viewed his trip to Moscow in February 2022 and impromptu announcement of Pakistan’s “neutrality” in the US-NATO-instigated war with Russia as needlessly jeopardizing Islamabad’s already badly frayed relations with Washington. That Khan, at the IMF’s insistence announced massive cuts in energy subsidies at the beginning of 2022, then reversed them in the face of a popular outcry, also badly damaged ruling-class confidence in his government.

Since his ouster, Khan has been able to retain, even regain, a measure of popular support, particularly among the PTI’s traditional base in sections of the urban middle class. Like large swathes of the population, these layers, from small shopkeepers to recent university graduates, have been battered by the past two years of mounting economic crisis, including soaring prices, a plunging rupee and mass unemployment and underemployment.

During the many years he was a political also-ran, Khan crafted an image as an “outsider,” one he has continued to try to exploit and burnish by pointing to the conspiratorial machinations that caused his government to fall. He has also no doubt benefited from popular outrage and sympathy over the legal vendetta to which he

and the PTI have been subjected, including terrorism charges; as well as from mounting popular sentiment against the military, which tramples on democratic rights, squanders vast portions of the national budget on Pakistan’s reactionary military-strategic rivalry with India, and has amassed vast wealth and power through a series of military-controlled companies.

Now scorned by much of the ruling elite as a loose cannon, Khan has at times sharply criticized the military and US bullying. Yet he has repeatedly walked back such remarks, making clear his readiness to work with both and his support for the US-Pakistani strategic alliance. Forged in the early 1950s, the pivot of that alliance has always been the partnership between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military headquartered in Rawalpindi.

Whatever the political composition of Pakistan’s next government, it will come into bitter conflict with the working class and rural masses, even as it tries to negotiate an intractable geopolitical crisis, rooted in the escalating all-rounded strategic conflict between the US and China, its two most important strategic allies.

Although officially denied, it has been widely reported that the Pakistani military is supplying Ukraine, at Washington’s behest, with weapons via back channels.

With Washington coming ever closer to the brink of launching all-out war on Iran, Pakistan’s western neighbour, Islamabad is being brought ever closer to the horn of a strategic dilemma. The US and other Pakistani allies, most notably the Gulf States, which risk being drawn into such a conflict from its very beginning, will look to Islamabad for support. Beijing, on the other hand, will seek to prevent, ultimately potentially through military means, US imperialism from reordering the energy-rich Middle East, in preparation for a showdown with China.

Pakistan has already been drawn into the maelstrom of strikes and counter-strikes. Last month, Islamabad retaliated to an Iranian attack on Balochi separatists operating against Iran from its territory by striking targets in eastern Iran allegedly associated with groups fighting for the secession of Pakistan’s Balochistan province.

In December, Pakistan Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir met with high-placed Biden administration and Pentagon officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, during a week-long visit to Washington, about which virtually nothing has been said publicly.



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