

Infighting in Pakistan's ruling elite intensifies following shock election result

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The results of last Thursday's election in Pakistan, the world's fifth most populous state, constitute a stunning rebuke of the country's military, long its most powerful political actor.

With the support of the judiciary and state bureaucracy, it went to extraordinary lengths to manipulate the electoral process so as to ensure that jailed opposition leader and former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, Pakistan Movement for Justice) would be eliminated as significant factors in Pakistani establishment politics.

Instead, "independent" candidates backed by the PTI—the party was not allowed to run under its own banner—topped the National Assembly polls.

According to the official results, which the PTI and several other parties are contesting on the grounds of ballot stuffing, pro-PTI independents captured 93 of the 266 National Assembly seats up for election Thursday.

In the run-up to the polls, the military and courts cleared the way for the return to power of three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). However, the PML (N) won just 75 seats. The PML (N)'s long-time bitter rival, the Pakistan People's Party, sits in third place with 53 seats, while the remaining 45 are divided among independents and almost a dozen smaller parties.

Pakistan's military wields vast political and economic power and is the linchpin of the seven-decade-old, patron-client relationship between US imperialism and Pakistan's ruling class.

Egged on by Washington, the military orchestrated Khan's removal as prime minister in an April 2022 non-confidence vote, after he proclaimed Pakistan's PTI-led government would adopt a policy of "neutrality" on the US-NATO-instigated war with Russia over Ukraine.

Although he is a right-wing Islamic populist, Khan and his PTI have been subject to a legal vendetta since last May, when paramilitary forces seized him during a court appearance, and his supporters responded with nationwide protests that included the storming of a handful of military installations and the residence of at least one senior officer. Khan and several other senior PTI leaders have been jailed, along with thousands of party activists, some on bogus "terrorism" charges.

With the approach of last Thursday's vote, this repression

intensified. Khan was sentenced to lengthy prison terms in three separate cases and ruled ineligible to stand for election. The PTI was barred from contesting the polls, and those who stood as PTI-backed independents were prevented from using its cricket bat symbol on the ballot, a major impediment in a country where 40 percent of the population is illiterate.

Due to threats and violent attacks, the PTI-backed independents campaigned almost entirely online. On polling day, cellphone and mobile internet services were suddenly suspended nationwide to frustrate get-out-the-vote initiatives.

The PTI is claiming that were it not for ballot stuffing and other irregularities, it would have won as many as 175 seats.

What can be said with certainty is that tens of millions of Pakistanis seized on the vote as a means to express their anger and opposition to the military's vast power and reach and to the traditional ruling establishment as a whole.

It had been expected that voter turnout would fall sharply, due to disgust with the military's manipulation of the polls. However, preliminary reports indicate the turnout at 48 percent was down only marginally from the 2018 election's 51 percent. Far from being cowed, tens of millions turned out at the polls to voice their defiance. This went far beyond Khan's traditional support base among the urban middle class and included millions of working class people and a section of the rural toilers.

The establishment's attempt to ostracize and punish Khan clearly backfired, producing a wave of public sympathy and enabling him to exploit his carefully crafted image as a "political outsider."

Much of this is acknowledged in Western media reports about Pakistan's "shock election." What is left unsaid is that the results were also shaped and gave distorted expression to popular opposition to US imperialism and its wars, which have ravaged neighbouring Afghanistan and subjected millions in Pakistan's tribal regions to years of drone surveillance and strikes.

Among Pakistanis, there is also widespread outrage over the US-enabled Israeli genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza.

Khan is no opponent of US imperialism or for that matter the Pakistani military, which facilitated his coming to power in 2018. But unlike his rivals within the country's political

establishment, he has at times railed against Washington, accusing it of bullying and running roughshod over Pakistani sovereignty. Long a political also-ran, Khan significantly expanded his support in the first half of the last decade by denouncing the Obama-Biden administration's drone war in Pakistan, which terrorized the population of what was then the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and slaughtered large numbers of civilians.

To the dismay of the military and political establishment, Khan repeatedly publicly charged that Washington helped engineer his ouster, only later to pull back from his allegations. Although he vigorously denies the charge, Khan and his former foreign minister and the PTI's deputy chairman, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, were sentenced to 10-year jail terms at the end of last month for leaking "state secrets"—that is, leaking a cable or cipher from Pakistan's US ambassador relaying Washington's threats to freeze out Islamabad if Khan remained at the country's helm.

The election results have further intensified the infighting within Pakistan's elite, amid apprehensions about the ability of a weak government, largely viewed as illegitimate, to press forward with the austerity and economic "restructuring" measures demanded by domestic and global capital.

On Saturday, after the extent of the electoral rebuke became clear, Pakistan's Chief of Armed Services General Syed Asim Munir cynically declared that the nation needs "stable hands and a healing touch to move on from the politics of anarchy and polarisation."

This was a not so subtle appeal for the PML (N) and the PPP to stop their wrangling and form a national coalition government with other parties, but not the PTI. Such talks are now underway, although the PPP is concerned about further compromising itself by aligning with Nawaz Sharif and a PML (N) popularly seen to be the military's chief lapdog.

On Sunday, PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari flew to Islamabad to meet US Ambassador Donald Blome. This underscores that Washington is working behind the scenes to cobble together a government that will best serve its interests, including in its multiple wars, even while issuing pro forma statements of concern about election irregularities.

Although, Islamabad continues to publicly deny it, it is all but certain that a key element in the renewal of what had become badly frayed Pakistani-US relations was Islamabad's supply of weapons to Ukraine via a back channel.

The PTI is continuing to challenge the election results and has stated in response to General Munir that the only true "healing touch" would be the release of Imran Khan and all the PTI prisoners and for the establishment to accept that the PTI has a popular mandate to lead the government. But party spokesman Gohar Ali Khan has said that if the PTI's efforts to form a national government fail, it will go into opposition, suggesting it is trying to leverage the election results to effect an eventual reconciliation with the military-led establishment.

A likely further object of political conflict is the awarding of some 70 National Assembly seats "reserved" for women and "religious minorities." These seats are supposed to be awarded to the parties proportionately according to the seats they have won, but since the PTI members were elected as "independents," it could potentially be denied all such seats.

Pakistan is beset by intersecting economic, political and geopolitical crises. Recent months have witnessed a wave of significant social struggles. These include mass protests against punishing electricity tariff hikes, opposition to a wave of privatizations including of the national airline Pakistan International Airlines, and a "long march" against "disappearances" and summary executions perpetrated by Pakistan's military in Balochistan, site of a longstanding ethno-nationalist insurgency.

Within ruling class circles it is taken as a given that Islamabad will have to go to the IMF for further loans almost as soon as the next government takes office. Currently, the country has only \$8 billion in reserves, equivalent to less than two months' worth of imports.

However, and this has been reflected in a sharp slide in the country's stock market since Friday, there are apprehensions over the ability of the next government to impose the austerity and privatization measures needed to satisfy the vampires of the IMF and global investors.

"A weak coalition government," lamented former Pakistani diplomat Maleeha Lodhi in a *Dawn* op-ed Monday, "will dampen the prospects of wide-ranging economic reforms that Pakistan desperately needs to put it on the trajectory of sustainable growth and investment. If the next government is a minority one, dependent for survival on appeasing a motley group of parties, will it be able to take tough and politically painful decisions to extricate the country from the economic crisis?"

The geopolitical crisis confronting Pakistani capitalism is also full of explosive charges as the US pursues its all-sided economic and military-strategic offensive against China, Islamabad's "all-weather" strategic ally; lavishes India, Pakistan's historic rival, with strategic favours so as to harness it still more tightly to its preparations for war with China; and wages a campaign of aggression against Pakistan's western neighbour, Iran, that could rapidly spiral into all-out war.



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