



Pakistan's Domestic Political Setting

Overview

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy in which the prime minister is head of government and the president is head of state. A bicameral parliament is comprised of a 342-seat National Assembly (NA) and a 104-seat Senate, both with directly elected representatives from each of the country's four provinces (Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KPk, Punjab, and Sindh), as well as from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the Islamabad Capital Territory (the quasi-independent regions of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan have no representation). The NA reserves 60 seats for women and 10 seats for religious minorities on a proportional basis, meaning only 272 districts elect representatives. The prime minister is elected to an indeterminate term by the NA. The president is elected to a five-year term by an Electoral College comprised of both chambers of Parliament, as well as members of each of the country's four provincial assemblies. NA and provincial assembly members are elected to five-year terms. Senate terms are six years, with elections every three years. Senate powers are limited, and only the NA can approve budget and finance bills.

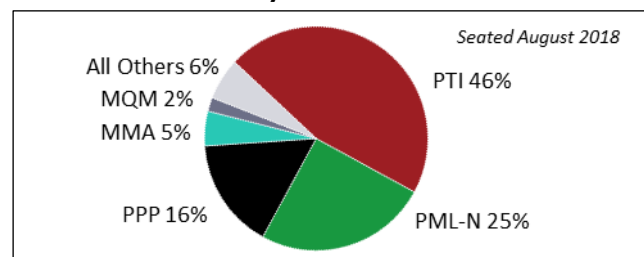
Historically, constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy have fared poorly in Pakistan, marked by tripartite power struggles among presidents, prime ministers, and army chiefs. The country has endured direct military rule for nearly half of its 71 years of independence—most recently from 1999 to 2008—interspersed with periods of generally weak civilian governance. Pakistan has had five Constitutions, the most recent being ratified in 1973 (and significantly modified several times since). The military, usually acting in tandem with the president, has engaged in three outright seizures of power from civilian-led governments: by Army Chiefs General Ayub Khan in 1958, General Zia ul-Haq in 1977, and General Pervez Musharraf in 1999. After 1970, five successive governments were voted into power, but not until 2013 was a government voted out of power—all previous were removed by the army through explicit or implicit presidential orders. Of Pakistan's three most prominent prime ministers, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was executed; his daughter Benazir Bhutto was exiled and later assassinated; and three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has never completed a term.

2018 National and Provincial Elections

Elections to seat Pakistan's 15th NA and four provincial assemblies took place as scheduled in July 2018, successfully marking the country's second-ever and consecutive democratic transfer of power. The outcome saw a dramatic end to the decades-long domination of Pakistan's national politics by two dynastic parties, as the relatively young Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI or Movement for Justice) party swept a large plurality of NA

seats (see **Figure 1**) and now leads a coalition in the Punjab assembly while retaining its majority in KPk. Party founder and leader Imran Khan was elected prime minister in August 2018 with support from several smaller parties in a PTI-led federal ruling coalition. The Pakistan Muslim League faction of Nawaz Sharif (PML-N) was ousted at both the federal and Punjab government levels (Punjab is home to more than half of all Pakistanis).

Figure 1. Major Party Representation in Pakistan's 15th National Assembly



Source: CRS using data from Election Commission of Pakistan.

Voter turnout was a modest 51% (down from 55% in 2013), with campaigning and Election Day marred by lethal terrorist attacks. Many analysts contend that Pakistan's security services covertly manipulated the country's domestic politics before and during the election with a central motive of (again) removing Nawaz Sharif from power and otherwise weakening his incumbent party. A purported "military-judiciary nexus" allegedly came to favor Khan's PTI. Election observers and human rights groups issued statements pointing to sometimes "severe" abuses of democratic norms, and the unprecedented participation of small parties with links to banned Islamist terrorist groups was seen to embolden militants (Islamist parties won a combined 10% of the national vote in 2018).

Zardari/PPP Era, 2008-2013

After nine years of direct military rule under General Musharraf and just weeks after Benazir Bhutto's 2008 murder, her dynastic Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won a plurality of both votes and NA seats in 2008 elections, and the party went on to lead a sometimes thin coalition government under de facto control of her widower, Asif Ali Zardari, who won the presidency later in 2008 and was the country's most powerful politician until his term ended in 2013. Formal civilian governance was restored, although the military continued to wield considerable influence over the country's foreign and national security policies. While in office, the PPP-led coalition reversed many of the constitutional changes implemented by the military government it had replaced, including restoring most executive powers to the prime minister.

Sharif/PML-N Era, 2013-2018

The 2013 national elections saw Sharif's PML-N win an outright majority (56%) of NA seats, defeating both the incumbent PPP and a new national-level challenge from Khan's PTI, which surged into prominence after 2011. The PML-N's historic mandate was a Punjabi one—more than 90% of the party's NA seats were from that province, where Nawaz's brother Shabaz was chief minister. Nawaz saw his third prime ministerial term end abruptly in July 2017, when he was barred from holding office by the Supreme Court for tax evasion and willful nondisclosure of significant overseas assets (he was convicted and jailed just weeks before the 2018 elections). Many observers called Sharif's removal a “soft coup” orchestrated by the military. A PML-N loyalist served his term's final ten months.

Khan/PTI Era, 2018-Present

Prime Minister Khan had no governance experience prior to winning his current office. His “Naya [New] Pakistan” vision—which appeared to animate many younger, urban, middle-class voters—emphasizes anti-corruption and creation of a “welfare state” that provides better education and health care, but the latter effort has foundered due to the country's acute financial crisis, and a need for new foreign borrowing and government austerity. Most analysts see Pakistan's military establishment continuing to retain dominant influence over foreign and security policies.

Key Government Officials

Prime Minister Imran Khan, an Oxford-educated Pashtun from Lahore, played cricket professionally for decades before entering politics, and led in establishing a cancer hospital and technical college in Punjab.

Foreign Affairs Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, a prominent Punjabi politician and PTI Vice Chairman, served as foreign minister in a PPP-led government from 2008 before joining PTI in 2011.

Finance Minister Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, a U.S.-educated economist and politician from Sindh, held the same position from 2010 to 2013, and was appointed in April 2019.

Defense Minister Pervez Khattak, a Pashtun from KPK's Nowshera district and former PTI Secretary General, was KPK chief minister from 2013 to 2018.

Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa began his three-year appointment in November 2016 and is widely described as professional and nonpolitical. He previously served as Commander of X Corps in Rawalpindi.

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Director-General Lt. General Faiz Hamid, previously the ISI's internal security chief, received his third star in April 2019 and began his three-year appointment in June.

Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khan Khosa, a key judge in the 2017 disqualification of then-PM Sharif, has led the Supreme Court since January 2019.

President Arif Alvi, a founding PTI member, was elected to the now largely ceremonial position in September 2018.

Leading Parties

The following five parties won 89% of NA seats in 2018:

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was founded by Imran Khan in 1996. Centrist and nationalist in orientation, with anti-corruption as its flagship campaign issue, the party won numerous prominent converts after 2011. Although Khan had been a cricket superstar, “jet-setting playboy,” and philanthropist, he led the PTI in relative political obscurity for more than 16 years before emerging as a major player early this decade. In 2013, his party won a majority of provincial assembly seats in the Pashtun-majority KPK province, where it has seen a mixed governance record. Khan has been a vehement critic of the United States in the past and is viewed by some as sympathetic toward Islamist militants. The PTI holds 149 NA seats—almost half of them from the Punjab heartland—won nearly 32% of the 2018 vote nationally, leads both the Federal and Punjab ruling coalitions (the latter under Chief Minister Sardar Uzman Buzdar), and continues to run the KPK province (under Chief Minister Mahmood Khan).

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was established in 1993 by then-Prime Minister Sharif as an offshoot of the country's oldest party and the only major party existing at the time of independence. With a center-right orientation and home to many religious conservatives, its core constituency is in Punjab province. Under Shabaz Sharif's campaign leadership the PML-N won 81 NA seats with over 24% of the 2018 vote, and it leads the national opposition alliance.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was established in 1967 by former Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto. Democratic socialist and home to many so-called “secularists,” its main constituency is in Sindh, where it continues to run the provincial government (under Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah). The PPP Chairman is Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of former President Asif Zardari and former PM Benazir Bhutto. The PPP won 54 NA seats with 13% of the 2018 vote, and is part of the national opposition alliance.

Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) is a coalition of five conservative Islamist parties, most notably the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl-ur (JUI-F), a Deobandi party led by cleric Fazl-ur Rehman since 1988, ideologically similar to the Afghan Taliban and with links to Pakistani militant groups. The MMA won 15 NA seats—all of them from KPK and Baluchistan provinces—with nearly 5% of the 2018 vote, and is part of the national opposition alliance.

Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) is a regional party established by descendants of pre-partition immigrants (Muhajirs) from what is now India. Secular and focused on provincial issues, its core support is wholly limited to Karachi and other Sindh urban centers. The MQM won 7 NA seats with about 1.4% of the 2018 vote, and is part of the PTI-led ruling coalition.

Sources: Government of Pakistan agencies; party websites

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