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Imran Khan and the Pakistani Elections: Political Visions, Coalitions and Prospects

Pakistan will witness national parliamentary elections on 25 July 2018. Opinion polls are predicting a tight battle between the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. Khan's relentless focus on the issue of corruption has won him broad support, especially amongst the urban youth. He has also made a conscious effort to appeal to religiously and socially conservative sections of Pakistani society. He has, for instance, expressed strong support for the 'blasphemy laws'. Apart from attempting to stitch together a wide coalition of voters, Khan has also astutely won over a number of politically powerful traditional elites, feudal leaders and spiritual authorities who had previously been elected under the PML-N ticket. Even before the votes are in, his opponents have already described this as an election rigged in his favour by the military. If Khan does emerge as the next prime minister of Pakistan, he may find himself having to confront allegations of match fixing and fielding questions on the legitimacy of the electoral process itself.

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Some 106 million registered voters in Pakistan will cast their ballots to elect a new national parliament and provincial assemblies on 25 July 2018. Opinion polls are predicting a tight

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battle between the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) [Pakistan Movement for Justice]. Ever since he launched his political career in 1997, Imran Khan – the flamboyant cricketer turned politician – has attracted immense media attention both in Pakistan and beyond. The political arena has, however, proven to be a sticky wicket for Khan. Despite his celebrity status, he has struggled to break the hold of the two established political parties – the PML-N and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) – over national politics. His party, the PTI, formed the provincial government in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after the 2013 elections but failed to make a major dent at the national level. This time around, the opinion polls seem to indicate that he may well emerge as the next prime minister of Pakistan.

From Cricket to Politics

An Oxford alum, Khan entered politics after an illustrious career in cricket. He became a household name when he captained the Pakistan national team to victory in the 1992 cricket World Cup.

Following his retirement from cricket, Khan used his popularity to raise over US\$20 million (S\$27.3 million) to build the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre. Named after his mother, it is the largest cancer hospital in Pakistan. The cost for treating nearly 75 per cent of its patients is borne by the hospital itself.

In 1996, Khan turned his attention towards politics. After forming the PTI in 1996, he took part in the 1997 general elections and ran for a National Assembly seat from two constituencies. He ended up losing both to the PML-N. In the subsequent elections of 2002, Khan was elected to the National Assembly from his hometown, Mianwali. His party, however, was unable to garner substantial support. While Khan himself was popular, it was clear that his party lacked any grassroots structure and support.

In the last decade, Khan's political career has seen an upswing. Between 2008 and 2013, Pakistan witnessed a worsening economic and security situation, along with widespread energy shortages and high inflation. Khan began to attract support amongst sections of the

disillusioned urban middle-class youth as well as those angered by drone strikes in the tribal areas. While his rallies attracted thousands, he was still unable to break the hold that the PPP and the PML-N had over electoral politics. In the 2013 elections, his party won 35 seats in the National Assembly. More substantially, it formed the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Stitching Together a Broad Coalition of Voters

At a rally in Lahore, Punjab, on 21 July 2018, Khan declared to a cheering crowd, “We will change Pakistan...we will end corruption”.² Khan’s relentless focus on the issue of corruption during the election campaign has won him broad support, especially amongst the urban youth. Khan has consistently stressed that the “biggest problem in Pakistan is corruption”. The challenges inflicting Pakistan are firmly blamed on corrupt politicians from the PML-N and the PPP who have, in his words, robbed the resources of Pakistan and hidden their assets overseas.

Indeed, the upswing in Khan’s political fortunes can be traced to his successful agitation against the previous prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, over the issue of corruption. In April 2016, the ‘Panama Papers’ leak revealed that eight off-shore companies had links with Sharif’s family. Khan launched a two-pronged campaign demanding the resignation of Sharif. At one level, he organised mass protests that attracted tens of thousands. This allowed him to capture the public imagination and expand his party’s grassroots reach. At another level, Khan filed a petition in the Supreme Court calling for a probe against Sharif and demanded that he resign as prime minister at least until the allegations were disproven. After much delay and foot-dragging, hearings began in November 2016 and, on 28 July 2017, the Supreme Court disqualified Sharif from office and ordered the National Accountability Board to file three corruption references against the Sharif family. Less than a year before the general elections, this constituted a massive political victory for Khan.

On his part, Khan has promised to deliver a non-corrupt government and develop an Islamic welfare state that will provide educational and health facilities to the masses. The PTI

² “Imran Khan Speech in Shalimar Chowk Lahore”, *PTI Jalsa*, 21 July 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bY_vPm5hVLM. Accessed 23 July 2018.

members point to their record in governing the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as evidence of their ability to deliver a just government. It is worth noting that initiatives introduced by the PTI government in the healthcare sector have expanded health facilities and provided healthcare to the poor. The Sehat Sahulat insurance scheme, a state-funded insurance programme that provides free healthcare to the people of the province and also provides a percentage of the wages lost due to a health emergency, has been widely praised. Khan has described this as the cornerstone of the Islamic welfare state that he aims to develop.

Over the years, Khan's statements in support of sections of the Taliban, open rejection of American military aid and mocking of Pakistani liberals has led to him being labelled by his opponents as 'Taliban Khan'. In the lead up to his election, he has made a conscious effort to appeal to religiously and socially conservative sections of Pakistani society. Khan has, for instance, expressed strong support for the 'blasphemy laws' – a series of colonial-era laws that allow for punishment to be meted out to someone deemed to have insulted the Prophet Muhammad. Khan's often unprovoked defense of the blasphemy laws indicate that this is a calculated decision. Moreover, Khan and other PTI candidates have on numerous occasions accused the PML-N of attempting to weaken the blasphemy laws. They have also accused the PML-N of altering the oath to office to allow for members of the Ahmadiyya community to be sworn in as members of the Muslim community. The Ahmadiyya are members of a controversial minority that is widely denounced as ascribing to un-Islamic practices because a section of the community believes in the continuation of prophecy after Muhammad. Khan's statements on the Ahmadiyya and blasphemy laws have opened him up to criticism of mainstreaming issues that had, hitherto, been the domain of the Islamists and religious parties.

Victory for the PTI depends on the party's ability to make major inroads into the province of Punjab. With 141 of the 272 parliamentary seats at stake in the election, Punjab is key to winning a majority at the national level. Punjab is also the bastion of the PML-N. In 2013, the PML-N came to power on the basis of its sweep of constituencies in Punjab. Apart from attempting to stitch together a wide coalition of voters, ranging from disenchanted urban youth to socially conservative figures, Khan has also astutely won over a number of politically powerful traditional elites, feudal leaders and spiritual authorities who had previously been elected under the PML-N ticket. Known as the "electables", these are candidates whose socio-political dominance in specific areas is believed to ensure their

political victory. The electables have traditionally been aligned with the PPP and the PML-N. Khan and the PTI have acknowledged that their chances of winning Punjab are contingent, in some measure at least, upon winning over the electables. Concerted attempts to woo them has resulted in the PTI having drawn in more than 20 electables contesting in Punjab.

It's Not Cricket

Even before a single vote has been cast, Khan's opponents have already described this as an election rigged in his favour. Some have even called it the dirtiest election ever. They assert that the military has thrown its weight behind Khan, and persecuted and censored his opponents. In fact, the PML-N has tried to turn this election into a battle between the military's candidate (Khan) and those (PML-N) who are challenging the deep state. On its part, the PPP's campaign has largely focused upon what it describes as the sacrifices made by the Bhutto family in the struggle against military dictatorship.

There are serious and valid concerns over the military's role in this election. Leading news mediums such as GEO TV and Dawn have complained about their coverage of the elections being curtailed. The management of Dawn, which is Pakistan's largest English language daily, has stated that the circulation of their paper was restricted in the wake of the paper having covered an interview with Sharif in which he was widely seen to be openly critical of the military. In a report released on 23 July 2018, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan substantiated these allegations. The report stated that the Commission's investigations revealed that, "[s]ales and distribution agents have corroborated the Dawn management's complaint of unlawful interference with distribution of their newspaper...in at least 20 targeted cities and towns."³ The report also found that GEO TV's coverage was disrupted on a number of occasions. In addition to this, journalist and media houses were found to have received "press advice" detailing issues that they should not report on.

As expected, Khan and his supporters have rubbished the allegations of rigging as "excuses" and "distractions" from the major issues. Khan has, however, carefully shied away from

³ "Curbs on freedom of expression in Pakistan: Summary of HRCPC fact-finding exercise". <http://hrpcweb.org/hrpcweb/curbs-on-freedom-of-expression-in-pakistan-summary-of-hrcpc-fact-finding-exercise/>. Accessed 24 July 2018.

discussing issues that may be seen as being critical of the military. The fact that Khan has received the backing of the military opens up the possibility of the PPP and the PML-N forming a coalition to keep the PTI out of power. This would, of course, depend on how many seats the PPP is able to retain in its bastion of Sind. While the PPP is expected to win substantially less seats than the PML-N and the PTI, its leadership is aiming to play the role of the kingmaker.

If Khan does emerge as the next prime minister of Pakistan, he may find himself having to confront allegations of match fixing and fielding questions on the legitimacy of the electoral process itself. He may also do well to draw a lesson from the rise and fall of Sharif who had previously been supported by the military.

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