

# ISAS Insights

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## The Performance of Religious Parties in Pakistan's Elections

*Devotion to Islam has historically not translated into significant political support for religious parties in Pakistan. The 2018 elections seem to have followed a similar trend. This time, however, the religious vote bank was bolstered by newly-formed parties which have found support in urban centres across the country.*

Riaz Hassan and Faiza Saleem<sup>1</sup>

Islam is an integral part of Pakistani Muslim identity, as a marker of religious devotion and as a cultural signifier. This devotion to religion, however, has not translated into political support for religious parties that seek to enhance the role of Islam in the public and private spheres. In Pakistan's often tumultuous political history, no religious party has been able to win an election and form the government. The closest any party has come to the political centre-stage was in the 2002 general elections, held under military rule, when Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA),<sup>2</sup> clinched 11.3 per cent of the vote and formed the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This was largely due to resentment over the American

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<sup>2</sup> Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal is an alliance of religious parties, including Jamat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam – Fazal-ur-Rehman. In 2002, the alliance comprised six religious parties, including Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan, Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan, Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith and Jamiat Ulema Islam-Sami ul Haq.

invasion of Afghanistan, which generated strong anti-United States sentiments. Even then, the party was unable to make any significant impact in the larger provinces of Punjab and Sindh.

By the 2008 elections, this alliance had fractured, mainly due to key differences between the two major political parties in the alliance – Jammāt-e-Islāmī (JI) and Jamīat Ulema-e-Islām (JUI-F). JI boycotted the elections and MMA lost its popularity as quickly as it had gained it. It received a mere 2.1 per cent of the votes, as the country, once again, overwhelmingly voted for the centre right Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and the centre-left Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarians (PPP) [see Table 1].

In the next elections in 2013, JI and JUI-F were unable to reconcile their differences and contested the elections separately. This resulted in both losing ground to each other, with the religious parties combined receiving only 6.74 per cent of the votes. The 2013 elections saw the rejection of religious parties by voters and a revival of PML-N, which secured 32.8 per cent of the votes. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), the centre-right party, led by Imran Khan, received 16.9 per cent of the votes and formed the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

## **The 2018 Elections**

In 2018, the 12 religious parties contesting the elections were able to secure 9.8 per cent or roughly 5.21 million votes. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, religious parties have always historically performed better, and in this election, they secured 19.4 per cent and 16.7 per cent of the votes respectively. In numbers, the highest number of votes for religious parties came from Punjab (2.7 million) but this only represented eight per cent of the electorate in the province. In Sindh, 1.1 million votes were cast in favour of religious parties, slightly better than Punjab – this represented 11 per cent of the votes. In these elections, the MMA alliance, headed by JI and JUI-F, came together once again and managed to secure 4.85 per cent or roughly 2.6 million votes. As a result, MMA is the only religious party to have achieved representation in the National Assembly, with 12 seats. It also succeeded in winning one seat in the Sindh Assembly, nine seats in the Balochistan Assembly and 10 seats in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly.

MMA has lost political ground over the years. For instance, in the 2002 elections, it had secured 3.3 million votes and 63 National Assembly seats. In the 2013 elections, JI and JUI-F contested separately and secured 963,903 and 1,461,371 votes respectively, with 19 seats between them. Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Nazrayati, a well-established religious party, suffered a similar fate. It managed to win 34,170 votes, compared to 103,098 votes in the 2013 elections (see Table 2).

## **New Religious Parties**

While established religious parties faced setbacks in the polls, it was the newly-formed Islamic parties participating in their first elections that were able to carve a place for themselves. Of these, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) showed the strongest performance. TLP is an electoral front of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah, a Barelvi group,<sup>3</sup> founded by cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi. It is known for its aggressive stance on blasphemy laws and *Khatam-e-Nabuwat* (the finality of the Prophethood) in Pakistan, and aims to revive Barelvi politics. Khadim Hussain Rizvi rose to prominence over the last two years as a result of a series of successful public rallies. This galvanised his support among various Barelvi groups in the country. TLP's performance in its first general election has surpassed expectations. It has turned it into a formidable rival for the Deobandi groups (JI and JUI), while also making inroads into the vote bank of PML-N, which has historically received the political support of the Barelvi groups.

In the 2018 elections, held on 25 July 2018, TLP gained 2.2 million or 4.22 per cent of the votes for the National Assembly. These votes translated into 43 per cent of the religious votes cast across the country, making TLP the fifth largest party in the country. It was unable to make considerable headway in the vote banks of MMA in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, although it cut into the latter's votes in Punjab and Sindh. For instance, in Punjab, TLP gained 1.9 million votes or roughly 5.7 per cent, as well as 70 per cent of all votes cast for religious parties, making it the third largest party behind PTI and PML-N. In Sindh, it was also able to make significant inroads, gaining 0.4 million or 37 per cent of the

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<sup>3</sup> Barelvi is a movement following the Sunni Hanafi School and is most closely associated with Sufi practices. Barelvi and Deobandi (scripturalistic) are two of the main groups of Sunni Muslims in Pakistan.

votes cast for religious parties. It was, however, unable to gain seats in the National Assembly and won only two seats in the Sindh Provincial Assembly (see Table 3).

Commentators have also observed that TLP drew voters away from the major political parties and inadvertently impacted the election results. It is believed that the votes it picked up dented PML-N's prospects in at least 13 constituencies across the country and PTI's votes in at least six.<sup>4</sup>

Other newly-formed religious parties have also performed well. For instance, the Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek (AAT), backed by the Milli Muslim League (MML),<sup>5</sup> the political face of the Hafiz Saeed, led by Jamaatud Dawa, also contested the elections. It was able to gather 171,356 votes or 0.32 per cent of the votes for the National Assembly, and secured 236,386 votes in Punjab. Other religious parties that performed positively were Pakistan Rah-e-Haq Party (PRHP) and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Islam (TLI) – they gathered over 55,000 votes each for the National Assembly. For the provincial assemblies, PRHP secured the most votes from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but also received some support from Sindh. On the other hand, TLI secured the most votes from Punjab (106,045).

It is worth noting that the newly-formed religious parties have received more votes from the urban centres. The TLP, for instance, picked up two provincial seats from Karachi – PS107 and PS115. In constituencies where the TLP won significant number of votes, such as Lyari, Korangi, Liaquatabad and Kemari, it did so by focusing on the Barelvi votes, as well as lower-middle income, working class communities and literate middle-class Memon traders across the city.

In Lahore, TLP also emerged as the third largest party after PTI and PML-N, gaining over 20,000 votes in some constituencies, including the lower and middle-income areas of the city. For instance, in NA123, it received 23,952 votes. This constituency includes the oldest parts of Lahore, including Matchus Factory, Saeed Park, Qaiser Town, Kot Shahabud Din, Ravi

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<sup>4</sup> “What is Behind the Sudden Rise of TLP?”, Ahmed Yusuf, *DAWN*, 5 August 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1425085/what-is-behind-the-sudden-rise-of-ttp>. Accessed on 8 August 2018.

<sup>5</sup> The Election Commission of Pakistan disallowed MML from contesting the 2018 elections and refused to recognise it as a legitimate political party due to its links with Jamaatud Dawa, a front for the militant organisation, Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Road and Shahdara. It includes the Arain, Gujjar, Rajput, Jat and Kashmiri clans, as well as a sizeable number of Pashtun settlers.

## **Conclusion**

In Pakistan, religious parties have traditionally not won the popular vote, with the centre-left, centre and centre-right political parties tending to form the government. The 2018 elections followed a similar trend, with all the religious parties combined only able to secure a mere 9.8 per cent of the votes. Well-established religious parties suffered setbacks in the election, and the religious vote bank was further reduced by new entrants, such as TLP, PRHP, AAT and TLI. These parties not only secured over 2.2 million votes but also dented PML-N's and PTI's prospects in multiple constituencies. The results show that religious parties which adopt a hard-line stance on issues like blasphemy and the finality of the Prophethood are resonating with people, but not enough to bring these parties to power. Issues related to governance, employment and purchasing power still dominate the minds of Pakistani voters.

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**Table 1: Percentage of votes won by major political parties in general elections**

	2018	2013	2008	2002	1997	1993
Total Votes	52,982,101	45,388,404	35,678,035	29,572,712	19,516,716	20,293,307
Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)	1.38*	5.4	7.2	3.1	-	-
Awami National Party (ANP)	1.54	1	2	-	1.8	1.7
Balochistan National Party (BNP)	0.45	0.1	-	-	0.6	-
Pakistan People's Party (PPP)	13.05	15.2	29.9	25.8	21.3	37.9
Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI)	31.87	16.9	-	-	1.6	-
Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q)	0.98	3.1	22.4	25.7	-	-
Awami Muslim League (AML)	0.23	0.2	-	-	-	-
Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N)	24.40	32.8	19.1	9.4	44.8	39.9
Pakistan Muslim League (PML-F)	0.14	2.4	1.9	1.1	-	-
Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F)	-	3.2	-	-	1.7	-
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	-	2.1	-	-	-	-
Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)	4.85	-	2.1	11.3	-	-
Mutahida Deeni Mahaz	-	0.8	-	-	-	1.1
Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Nazryati (JUI-N)	0.06	0.2	-	-	-	-
Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP)	-	0.1	-	-	-	-
Sunni Ittehad Council	0.01	0.1	-	-	-	-
Sunni Tehreek	0.01	0.1	-	-	-	-
Tehreek-e-Labbaik Islam	4.22	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Democratic Alliance	2.25	-	-	-	-	-
Balochistan Awami Party (BAP)	0.60	-	-	-	-	-
Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party	0.25	-	-	-	-	-
Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek	0.32	-	-	-	-	-

\* MQM split into two factions. MQM London is led by Altaf Hussain whereas MQM Pakistan is run by Farooq Sattar. The election results shown here are that of MQM-P.

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan (<https://www.ecp.gov.pk/>)

**Table 1: National Assembly seats won by religious parties**

	2018	2013	2008	2002	1997	1993
Total Votes	52,982,101	45,388,404	35,678,035	29,572,712	19,516,716	20,293,307
Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)	12	-	8	63	-	-
Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (JUI-F)	-	15	-	-	2	-
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	-	4	-	-	-	-
Mutahida Deeni Mahaz	-	0	-	-	-	1.1
Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Nazryati (JUI-N)	0	0	-	-	-	-
Jamiat Ulama-e-Pakistan (JUP)	-	0	-	-	-	-
Sunni Ittehad Council	0	0	-	-	-	-
Sunni Tehreek	0	0	-	-	-	-
Tehreek-e-Labbaik Islam	0	-	-	-	-	-
Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek	0	-	-	-	-	-
Pakistan Rah-e-Haq Party	0	-	-	-	-	-
Tehreek-e-Labbaik Islam	0	-	-	-	-	-
Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Pakistan (Noorani)	0	-	-	-	-	-
Majlis-e-Wahdat-e-Muslimeen Pakistan	0	0	-	-	-	-
Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Pakistan (S)	0	0	-	-	0	-

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan (<https://www.ecp.gov.pk/>)

**Table 3: 2018 Elections: National and provincial seats won by different parties**

	National Assembly	Punjab Assembly	Sindh Assembly	KP Assembly	Balochistan Assembly
PTI	116	123	23	65	4
PMLN	64	129	0	5	1
PPPP	43	6	78	4	0
IND	13	30	0	6	5
MMA	12	0	1	10	9
MQM(P)	6	0	16	0	0
PML-Q	4	7	0	0	0
BAP	4	0	0	0	15
BNP	3	0	0	0	5
GDA	2	0	11	0	0
JWP	1	0	0	0	1
ANP	1	0	0	7	3
AML	1	0	0	0	0
PML-F	0	0	0	0	0
PAR	0	1	0	0	0
TLP	0	0	2	0	0
PKMAP	0	0	0	0	1
HDP	0	0	0	0	2
BNPA	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Total Announced</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>50</b>

Source: Multiple Sources, including Election Commission of Pakistan (<https://www.ecp.gov.pk/>) and GEO News (<https://www.geo.tv/election>)