

Updated November 2, 2023

Pakistan's Domestic Political Setting

Overview

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy in which the prime minister (PM) is head of government and the president is head of state. The bicameral parliament is comprised of a 342-seat National Assembly (NA) and a 104-seat Senate. Both have directly elected representatives from each of the country's four provinces (Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KP, Punjab, and Sindh), as well as from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now part of KP) and the Islamabad Capital Territory (the quasi-independent regions of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan have no representation). Representatives are elected from 272 districts; the NA reserves 60 seats for women and 10 seats for religious minorities on a proportional basis. The prime minister is elected to by the NA. The president, with a largely ceremonial role, is elected to a five-year term by an Electoral College comprised of both chambers of parliament and members 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.

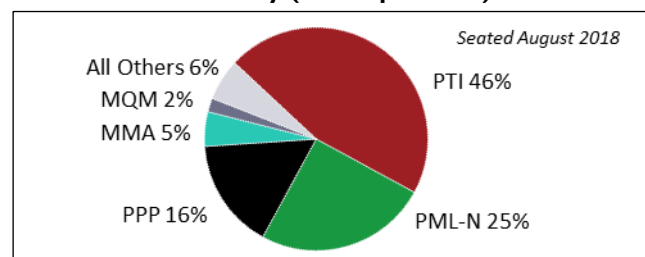
Historically, constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy have fared poorly in Pakistan, marked by tripartite power struggles among presidents, prime ministers, and army chiefs. The country has endured direct military rule for 33 of its 76 years of independence—most recently from 1999 to 2008—interspersed with periods of generally weak civilian governance. Pakistan has had five constitutions, the most recent 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 elected governments: by Army Chiefs Gen. Ayub Khan in 1958, Gen. Zia ul-Haq in 1977, and Gen. 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 directly by the army or through 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 PM Nawaz Sharif was convicted on corruption charges and lived in self-imposed exile from 2019 until his October 2023 return.

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 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, until April

2022, led a coalition in the Punjab provincial assembly while retaining the majority it won in KP in 2013. 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 provincial levels (Punjab is home to about 60% of Pakistanis).

Figure 1. Major Party Representation in Pakistan's 15th National Assembly (until April 2022)



Source: CRS using data from Election Commission of Pakistan.

Note: MMA: Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal; MQM: Muttahida Qaumi Movement; PML-N: Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz; PPP: Pakistan People's Party; PTI: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf.

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 and judiciary came to favor Khan's PTI over Sharif's PML-N, and covertly manipulated the country's domestic politics before and during the election to (again) remove Sharif's party from power. Election observers and human rights groups identified sometimes "severe" abuses of democratic norms, and candidates from parties with links to banned Islamist terrorist groups were allowed to participate (Islamist parties won a combined 10% of the national vote in 2018).

Political Upheaval and New Government

A late 2021 power struggle between PM Khan and the then-Army Chief over the appointment of a new intelligence director may have contributed to the security establishment withdrawing its support for Khan. In early 2022, opposition parties moved a no-confidence motion against Khan, accusing him of poor governance and economic mismanagement. The motion narrowly passed in April 2022 and Khan was removed from office. The NA then seated a new government under PML-N leader Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz's younger brother, in alliance with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and others among the 13-member Pakistan Democratic Movement. Khan, who still commands widespread popular support, denounced his removal, blaming it (without providing detailed evidence) on alleged machinations by the U.S. government and/or Pakistan Army leadership, both current and former. He and his party demanded new elections.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) demurred and the NA was dissolved in August 2023, days before its term ended. The ECP has delayed both provincial and national elections beyond the legally-mandated dates, despite an April 2023 Supreme Court ruling that delays of snap provincial elections in Punjab and KP were unconstitutional. Meanwhile, Khan was arrested on corruption charges in May 2023, a move some analysts say was provoked by his unprecedented public criticisms of security agencies and officials. The arrest sparked mass protests by PTI activists, including attacks on army installations; thousands of demonstrators were arrested, and the military—in possible collusion with the PML-N-led government—set about dismantling the PTI through a pressure campaign and arrests of party leadership.

In August 2023, Khan was convicted, sentenced to three years in prison, and banned from politics for five years. The conviction subsequently was suspended, but Khan remains jailed while awaiting trial on more serious charges of revealing state secrets. As per the constitution, a caretaker government under PM Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar was seated the same month to oversee the election process. New national elections, required to be held by mid-November under the constitution, have been delayed until February 2024, ostensibly in order to allow the ECP to delimit new districts based on a recently completed census. The Biden Administration has called on Pakistan to hold “free and fair and timely elections, and to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.”

Background: Zardari/PPP Era, 2008-2013

After nine years of direct military rule and just weeks after Benazir Bhutto's murder, her dynastic PPP won a plurality of both votes and NA seats in 2008 elections. 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. During this time, formal civilian governance was restored, with most executive powers returning to the prime minister.

Background: Sharif/PML-N Era, 2013-2018

The 2013 national elections saw Nawaz 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. The PML-N's mandate was a Punjabi one—90% of its seats came from that province. Sharif's third term as PM ended in 2017 when he was barred from holding office after convictions for tax evasion and willful nondisclosure of overseas assets. Many observers called Sharif's removal a “soft coup” orchestrated by the military. A PML-N loyalist served the final 10 months of his term.

Background: Khan/PTI Era, 2018-2022

Imran Khan had no governance experience prior to winning office. His “Naya [New] Pakistan” vision—which animated many younger, urban, middle-class voters—emphasized anticorruption and creation of a “welfare state,” but the latter effort foundered due to the country's acute financial crises. Most analysts saw Pakistan's military establishment continuing to retain dominant influence over foreign and security policies.

Key Government Officials

Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, a co-founder of the Balochistan Awami Party and a senator since 2018, is an establishment choice aligned with the military.

Chief of Army Staff Gen. Syed Asim Munir began a three-year appointment in November 2022. His brief tenure as head of Pakistan's main intelligence agency ended in 2019 after a reported clash with then-PM Khan.

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Director-General Lt. General Nadeem Anjum, previously commander of the army's Karachi-based V Corps, began a three-year appointment in November 2021.

Leading Parties

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), founded by Imran Khan in 1996, is centrist and nationalist in orientation, with anticorruption as its flagship campaign issue. The party's popularity surged in 2011 and, in 2013, Khan saw his party win a majority of provincial assembly seats in Pashtun-majority KP. Khan, a former cricket superstar, has been a vocal critic of the United States and, by some accounts, is sympathetic toward Islamist militants. The PTI won nearly 32% of the 2018 national vote nationally. Until April 2022, it held 155 NA seats, almost half of them from the Punjab heartland. PTI continued to oversee the KP province and, after surprise July 2022 by-election wins, also controlled the Punjab provincial government.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was established in 1993 by then-PM Nawaz 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. Under Shehbaz Sharif's campaign leadership the PML-N won 81 NA seats with over 24% of the 2018 vote. It led the national opposition alliance until Khan's April 2022 removal, and thereafter the government until its term ended in August 2023.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was established in 1967 by former PM Z.A. Bhutto. Democratic socialist and home to many so-called “secularists,” its main constituency is in Sindh, where it has run the provincial government. PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is the son of former President Asif Zardari and former PM Benazir Bhutto. The PPP won 54 NA seats with 13% of the 2018 vote and, after April 2022, was part of the national ruling coalition.

Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) is a coalition of five conservative Islamist parties, most notably the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl-ur (JUI-F) of cleric Fazl-ur Rehman. It is ideologically similar to the Afghan Taliban and has links to Pakistani militant groups. Rehman can generate considerable “street power” and led a major 2019 protest movement. The MMA won 15 NA seats—all of them from KP and Baluchistan—with nearly 5% of the 2018 vote.

Sources: Government of Pakistan agencies; party websites

K. Alan Kronstadt, Specialist in South Asian Affairs

IF10359

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.