

Pakistan's politics

Pakistan plunges into power vacuum after Imran Khan defies election odds from jail



Success for former PM's supporters deals blow to military establishment and heralds more instability

Benjamin Parkin in Lahore and **Farhan Bokhari** in Islamabad YESTERDAY

With Imran Khan in jail and many of his candidates in hiding, Pakistan's election was expected to snuff out the populist's bid for power in the country of 240mn.

Instead the success of those loyal to the former prime minister's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Justice Movement) party has stunned the country, dealing a historic blow to the military's political influence and threatening further prolonged instability as rival parties vie for control.

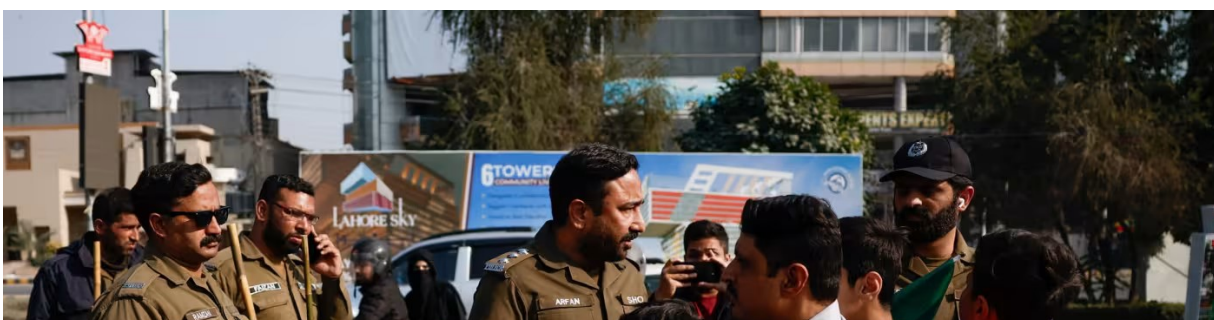
Observers said the PTI's emergence as the largest party on Thursday represented a rare repudiation of the powerful army's long-running manipulation of elections in [Pakistan](#), with voters recoiling at the increasingly overt attempts to crush Khan's party and prevent him from returning to office.

PTI voters "were joined by many voting [with] their conscience on the question of the military's interference in politics. That includes a much broader coalition," said Azeema Cheema, a director at Verso Consulting in Islamabad. "You cannot engineer elections that don't reflect the will of the people and [think that] the people will just accept it."

Yet even if the outcome leads to a longer-term reckoning over the army's hold over politics, the ensuing power vacuum will leave the crisis-stricken country even less governable as it approaches a crucial deadline for a new IMF bailout.

"This election raises serious questions about the long-assumed ability of the military establishment to shape election outcomes going forward," said Elizabeth Threlkeld, senior fellow at the Stimson Center think-tank in Washington.

But she added: "The fallout from this election is likely to take weeks to resolve . . . as time is running out for Pakistan to return to negotiations with the IMF."





Police officers stop PTI supporters displaying the party's flag in Lahore on Sunday © Navesh Chitrakar/Reuters

Khan's PTI was formally barred from running after a crackdown orchestrated by the army. But independent candidates affiliated with the party stormed to victory, winning 101 of 265 seats.

The party claimed to have [evidence of widespread vote-rigging](#) that robbed it of winning about 70 further seats, with the counting process marred by delays, a mobile network blackout and other alleged irregularities. It has launched legal challenges and urged protests outside counting centres, while the US and EU have called for investigations into the alleged interference.

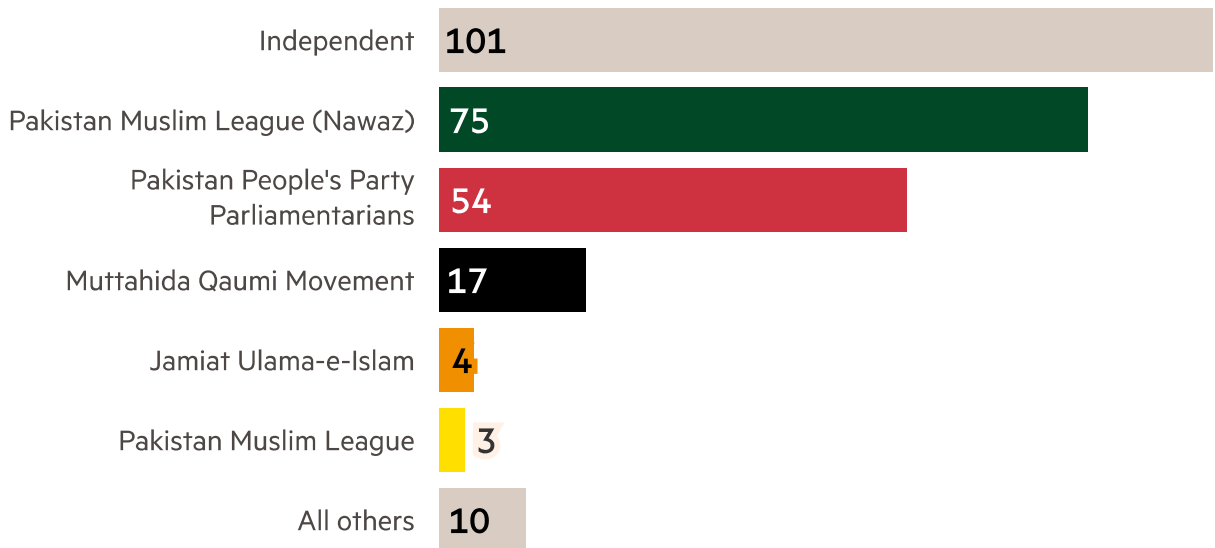
Khan's rise from cricket star to leader was enabled by the military, who saw him as a counter to Pakistan's political dynasties before a falling out after he was removed from power in 2022. He has been imprisoned since last year and was ineligible to contest after publicly criticising the army leadership. Thousands of PTI leaders and supporters were detained in the months before the polls and its candidates harassed, leaving pollsters expecting the party to have little chance of success.

"The [military] establishment, the parties — everyone was caught by surprise with this election because they underestimated the power of Imran Khan and the power of the PTI," Zulfiqar Bukhari, a PTI official, said.

But analysts said they expected the military to continue pushing for its favoured outcome, with Khan's rivals swiftly beginning coalition talks.

Independent candidates — many with ties to Imran Khan's barred PTI party — have won the most seats

National Assembly seats by party



Source: [Pakistan Electoral Commission](#)

As of February 11, 11am GMT with 264 of 266 constituencies reporting

FINANCIAL TIMES

The Pakistan Muslim League-N party of three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif declared victory on Friday despite winning a fewer-than-expected 75 seats, and said it would form a government.

It began negotiations with the Pakistan People's party of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of slain premier Benazir Bhutto, to revive a ruling coalition that had served briefly after Khan's ouster as prime minister.

Analysts said Sharif and Bhutto Zardari appeared over the weekend to have the best chance of forming a coalition government. Sharif in particular benefited ahead of the polls from multiple court decisions that [reversed a lifetime ban](#) on holding office following a 2018 corruption conviction.

“What we’re actually seeing is the combined power structure of Pakistan, not just the military but the judiciary and all the major political parties, coming together in an attempt to try to stop this populist tide,” said Khurram Husain, a columnist based in Karachi.

The PTI has downplayed the prospect of forming a coalition itself, vowing instead to overturn contested results in court and prove its majority.





The Pakistan Muslim League-N party of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, centre, declared victory on Friday and said it would form a government © Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images

One of its priorities will be getting its leader, whose personal charisma is the party's biggest vote winner, out of jail. Within the past two weeks Khan, who has been held since August, has been [sentenced on three separate charges](#) ranging from leaking state secrets to marrying illegally.

Lawyers have said they expect those cases to be overturned in higher courts but the PTI claims Khan is facing 200 more charges, leaving a swift release looking unlikely.

"We will bring our captain back," Rashid Khan, a young PTI supporter waving the party's green and red flag from the back of a motorcycle near Islamabad, said.

"Pakistan needs him more than ever before."

Authorities defended the conduct of the polls, with army chief General Asim Munir on Saturday calling them "free and unhindered". The foreign ministry said elections were held "peacefully and successfully, while dealing with serious security threats".

The cloud over the new parliament comes as the economic situation in Pakistan, which narrowly avoided default thanks to an IMF bailout last year, looks increasingly dire. Inflation hit 28 per cent in January, while foreign reserves of \$8bn are only enough to cover about six weeks' worth of imports.

With IMF support ending in April, economists say the next government will need new loans — which will require it to promise painful and unpopular reforms — to avoid a default.

"If the next government is a minority one, dependent for survival on appeasing a motley group of parties, it will be hard for it to take tough and politically painful

decisions,” said Maleeha Lodhi, a former Pakistani ambassador to the US.

Questions over the legitimacy of any incoming coalition is likely to make this process trickier — particularly if there is an indignant and boisterous PTI block sitting in opposition.

“If we have to be the strongest opposition the country has ever seen in parliament, 100-strong, then so be it,” Bukhari said. “We’re totally in the driving seat . . . We’re watching a really hopeless circus going on.”

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