



Pakistan General Elections 2018: What's at Stake?

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ABSTRACT

In well-functioning democracies where those who lose elections live to fight another day, the forthcoming general elections in Pakistan is a battle for survival for many of the main political players in the country. To begin with, the brazen intervention by the military establishment in the political process has

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left the polls little credibility. In many ways, the elections will set the future trajectory of politics in Pakistan. While the deck seems loaded overwhelmingly to put the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) in the driving seat, electoral politics is a little more complex than organising a marching drill, and the best of calculations can be proved wrong. This report examines the prospects of the various political players in the general elections. It analyses the dynamics of politics in various provinces across the country and how these will play out in the elections, and offers plausible political scenarios that could emerge once the results are declared.

INTRODUCTION

The general elections in Pakistan scheduled towards the end of July could usher in a new government; it is unlikely, however, to introduce significant changes in the country's governance. Regardless of who forms the next government, the political challenges, strategic imperatives and economic constraints that faced the previous government will only continue. The civil-military relations will remain fraught; and the strategic scenario will remain in a flux not only in the context of Afghanistan and India, but also in terms of relations with the US and other global powers, as well as with regards to the tightrope that Pakistan has to walk in the Middle East between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The prospect of an economic meltdown will likely continue to grip Pakistan in a vice-like bind.

Every election in Pakistan starting with the first one in 1970 has had a central theme: In 1970, it was about East Pakistan, provincial autonomy, and "*roti, kapra, aur makaan* (food, clothing, and shelter)"; 1977 was about 'Bhuttoism'; 1985 was about restoring democracy, albeit the non-party version of it; 1988, the return of Benazir Bhutto; 1990, the corruption cases against Benazir Bhutto and Asif Zardari, and the 'establishment' striking back; 1993 was about Nawaz Sharif and his crony capitalism. In 1997, it was about Bhutto and Zardari and their legendary loot; 2002, about restoring democracy, of the 'real democracy' kind directed by Gen. Musharraf; 2008, genuine democracy and anti-Musharraf sentiment; and 2013, the energy crisis and feckless governance of the Asif Zardari-led dispensation. This year, the election is about the judicial coup against Nawaz Sharif and the emergence of Imran Khan as the favourite child of the 'deep state'.

In many ways, the election will be a contest between the ability of the military establishment (commonly referred to as 'miltablishment' or 'deep state') to engineer electoral outcomes, on the one hand, and on the other, the resilience of arguably Pakistan's largest political party – the Pakistan Muslim

League – Nawaz (PML-N) – to hold on to its voters and constituencies. Although it is almost a truism that the military establishment is Pakistan's most powerful, well-organised and even well-funded political party, the army normally plays its political role through proxies and from behind the scenes. In the 2018 polls, the military's proxies are parties like Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) and the newly manufactured party in Balochistan – the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP). Other political players like the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) and even Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the mainstream religious parties' alliance, are also believed to have some surreptitious understanding with the military establishment and could play a critical role in government formation if all goes according to plan viz. a hung assembly. Along with these mainstream parties, the army is suspected to have unleashed extremist Islamist parties like the Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jamaatud Dawa's political wing, Milli Muslim League (MML), and the Bareilvi Islamist party Tehrik Labbaik Ya Rasul Allah (TLYRA or TLP), to sabotage the polls and eat into the votes of its *bete noire*, PMLN.

Among the three big political parties, the PMLN faces an uphill battle that is becoming tougher by the day. For one, the party's supreme leader, Nawaz Sharif and his heir apparent, daughter Maryam, are facing incarceration after being convicted of corruption charges. Moreover, many senior party candidates are restive, deserting the party mid-stream;¹ and PTI has its own share of problems, including divisions within party ranks over distribution of tickets and a party machinery which does not seem tuned for elections.² Meanwhile, the PPP is finding it difficult to get suitable candidates for most constituencies in Punjab—which is the real battleground. Its entire election calculus is now based on emerging as the swing player by winning enough seats in Sindh and holding the balance of power in the National Assembly that will be formed after the elections.

BATTLEGROUND PUNJAB

The real battleground in Pakistan's 2018 general elections will be the Punjab province. With 141 directly elected seats out of a total 272 in the National Assembly, whoever wins Punjab, gets to form the next government.

Voting in Punjab (as in most other parts of Pakistan) depends on a couple of factors. In every constituency, there is a party vote. Then there are the votes that a candidate can poll regardless of party affiliation. Apart from the party's and the candidate's votes, there is the *biradari* (clan, tribe, caste) factor that comes into play. Yet another critical political factor is the *dharra* (or the local

grouping of different interests represented by influential individuals). An important proportion of votes are polled on the basis of perception of the candidate's winnability—this is referred to colloquially as the 'tail-wind' or the 'bazaar buzz' in favour of a party or candidate, where voters tend to choose someone who is seen as having the higher chance of winning in order to not “waste” their vote. Finally, there is the factor of administrative support, or lack of it: the bureaucrats are good political weathercocks, and if their attitude is anything to go by, the wind is blowing a little in favour of PTI.

The outcome of any election depends on the aggregation and interplay of all these factors. These factors, however, can be upstaged by three things: one, the X-factor or the undercurrent that has been building up but is missed or glossed over by analysts, and which could throw up surprises that upset all calculations; two, a black-swan event – an assassination, a conflict, a conviction, a calamity or a catastrophe that comes without warning and completely alters the complexion of an election; and three, if the election is stolen and results are manufactured according to the political requirement of the 'miltabishment'.

The Punjab province can be broadly divided into three regions with varying political dynamics: north, central and south. In the 2013 elections, the PMLN had swept all three regions,³ even as its real stronghold is north and central Punjab. South Punjab was for long a bastion of the PPP, but since the 2013 polls, it has lost enormous political ground in south Punjab and is virtually non-existent in north and central Punjab. The PTI of Imran Khan is expected to put up a strong showing in south Punjab in the 2018 polls, as a large number of 'electable' candidates of the PMLN have deserted the party and joined PTI.⁴ Most of these deserters had used the excuse of a separate South Punjab province to quit the PMLN. For a few days, it appeared that South Punjab Province slogan would be a game-changer in this region, and every party from PMLN to PTI to PPP jumped on the South Punjab province bandwagon and promised to carve out a new province out of Punjab. But the South Punjab province slogan soon ran out of steam.

Yet, even as the South Punjab province slogan seems to have lost traction, the process of desertions from PMLN that it initiated has not ended. Adding to the PMLN's problems is that some of the candidates who had been allotted PMLN tickets, surrendered them on the last day, leaving PMLN without a candidate on more than half a dozen seats out of 46 in South Punjab.⁵ The controversy over the *khatm-e-nabuwwat* (finality of Prophet) issue has also been used to damage the PMLN.⁶ South Punjab is steeped in the so-called

Table 1: Seats Distribution (directly elected seats)

PROVINCE	REGION	Seats
Punjab	North Punjab	13
	Central Punjab	82
	South Punjab	46
	Total	141
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Malakand	10
	Hazara	7
	Peshawar Valley	14
	South KP	8
	Total	39
Sindh	Urban (Karachi + H'bad)	24
	Rural (Sindhi speaking)	37
	Total	61
Balochistan	Pashtun belt	5
	East Balochistan	2
	Central Balochistan	6
	Makran	3
	Total	16
Islamabad		3
FATA		12
TOTAL SEATS		272

'shrine culture', and most of the custodians of these shrines that have huge followings have jumped off the PMLN ship.

Many of the PMLN and PPP deserters who were not given PTI tickets have preferred to fight the elections as independent candidates.⁷ The calculation of most independents is that they will emerge as a swing bloc after the elections and can join whichever party wins the most seats. Of course, they will extract a hefty price if their support is required for getting a majority in the National Assembly. The PTI will not, however, get a walkover in most of the South Punjab seats because many influential and 'electable' candidates will be pitted against its nominees and could either end up winning, or even spoiling the chances of the PTI candidates by cutting into their votes. Of the 46-odd seats in south Punjab, the PMLN will be lucky if it can win around 10. The PPP is not expected to get more than four or five seats. The independents could end up winning at least around 10-15 seats and the PTI around 15-20.

The real battle will be in north and central Punjab where the PMLN has not suffered any big setbacks in terms of its strong candidates absconding. The

political engineering by the Pakistani military establishment or 'deep state' has not quite succeeded against the PMLN in the north and central Punjab. Opinion polls show that PMLN is still the frontrunner in the 95-odd seats that are up for grabs in these two regions of Punjab.⁸ The optimistic scenario in the PMLN is that it could win 60 to 65 seats in the region, perhaps even 70 because of the sympathy that has been generated on account of the perceived victimisation of Nawaz Sharif and his family by the judiciary and the military, and the intimidation of party candidates and leaders by the 'deep state'. What is more, the bulk of the development activity of the PMLN government was in this region and that would go down well with the voters. Most importantly, over the last few decades, the PMLN has created a huge and formidable patronage network in this belt that will be difficult to break.

The more pessimistic scenario is that the PMLN could be reduced to just around 40 seats.⁹ Political pundits reckon that the adversarial relationship with the military establishment has already pre-empted any chances of Nawaz Sharif's party being allowed to win: its candidates are being threatened, with some having been arrested and others forced to surrender their tickets. The media is being instructed to not give the Sharifs coverage, while the corruption watchdog, NAB, has been opening inquiries against party members. Further, the returning officers are rejecting nomination papers of the PMLN candidates and even though these are subsequently revoked, it takes time away from candidates that could have been used for campaigning. Some candidates have also been disqualified on charges of contempt of court, and there are rumours that not just Nawaz Sharif but also Shahbaz Sharif could be arrested, thereby effectively bringing the PMLN campaign to a halt.¹⁰ The bottomline is that a climate has been created in which the 'deep state' is stacking the deck to ensure a victory for Imran Khan's PTI. In other words, Imran Khan—using cricket analogy he himself is fond of—will be made to win a 'fixed match'. This bazaar talk could swing a lot of undecided votes in favour of PTI.

Add to this the absence of Nawaz Sharif and his daughter from the campaign, as they are in London attending to Nawaz's wife who is in critical condition in a hospital. Spearheading the campaign in Pakistan is Shahbaz Sharif, who enjoys a reputation for being a good organiser and administrator but is an ineffective public face for the party. Shahbaz just fails to connect with the masses the way Nawaz Sharif does. The PMLN vote is Nawaz Sharif's vote and the lacklustre campaign being led by Shahbaz is not really helping the PMLN. Unless Nawaz Sharif or Maryam Nawaz can put some fire in the campaign, the party could lose big in its bastion of north and central Punjab as well. However, the conviction of Nawaz Sharif and Maryam by an

Accountability court means that even when and if they return, they will almost certainly not be able to campaign. At the same time, their imprisonment could generate more sympathy and sway the undecided to vote for PMLN. Of course, if Nawaz Sharif refuses to return to avoid serving their sentence, his supporters will interpret it as cowardice. That could well close the curtains on Nawaz Sharif and his party.

Apart from the PMLN, the other players in Punjab include the PTI, PPP, and the independents (who could hold the balance of power in the National Assembly if either of the parties are unable to cross the halfway mark). There are also the religious parties such as the Milli Muslim League – the political arm of the internationally proscribed terror group, Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jamaatud Dawa that is fighting the polls under the banner of the Allah-o-Akbar Tehrik (AAT) – and the Bareilvi extremist party, Tehrik-e-Labbaik Ya Rasul Allah or Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLYRA).¹¹ The PPP is unlikely to win more than five seats, if at all, as it has been virtually wiped out from Punjab. It still has some support in South Punjab, but in north and central Punjab it is a minor player with hardly any effective candidates for all constituencies. Many of the people who were offered PPP tickets, prefer to fight as independents rather than run under the PPP banner.¹² The party lost so much ground in Pakistan's largest province that it is no longer even considered as a factor in the Punjab political scene. Much of the PPP vote has shifted to the PTI, which is now seen as the main challenger to the PMLN in Punjab.

The real fight in Punjab will be between the PTI and PMLN. In south Punjab, the PTI feels it will be able to make major inroads, largely because the PMLN has been severely damaged by the desertions. The PTI's competition in south Punjab is expected to be the influential local leaders or 'electable' who are fighting as independents. Even in the 2013 election, the independents emerged as the second largest winners after PMLN.¹³ This time, again, at least in south Punjab, the independents are expected to play a crucial role. Nevertheless, despite the scepticism of political analysts, the PTI is optimistic of getting at least 20 to 25 seats out of the 46 seats in the south.¹⁴ The PTI reckons that it has the right candidates and the organisational strength to do much better than they did the previous election. It also has the support of the 'establishment'. The bureaucracy is hedging its bets and will not do anything against the PTI.

In north and central Punjab, it is going to be a much tougher fight. But the PTI feels at the minimum it is well poised to get at least 50 out of the 95 seats. This means that in Punjab alone, the PTI is expecting at least 75 to 80 seats, and with a little help from the 'Khalai Maqlook' and 'Department of Agriculture' –

the new euphemisms for the 'Deep State' and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) – might even get 90 to 100.¹⁵ In the event this happens, PTI will be in a position to form the next government. Political analysts are less sanguine, projecting not more than 60 seats in the entire province for PTI. This is partly because of infighting in the PTI ranks and mismanagement in the distribution of tickets. While the PTI attracted many 'electable' individuals, the ones who have not been given the party ticket, are either fighting as independents or have tied up with other influential local leaders to support a candidate against the PTI.

The induction of the 'electables' from other parties has also riled the party workers who were expecting to be rewarded for their work in the opposition. Most of all, having made 'winnability' a criteria for allotting tickets, Imran Khan has compromised on his principles of "clean and transparent politics".¹⁶ This has caused many of the undecided voters to lose faith in Imran Khan, seeing him now as no different from the other politicians. He is being perceived as covetous of power by any means (including getting the support of the military establishment), and this has lost him a lot of potential voters. Some of the local-level seat adjustments that Imran Khan has made with old-school politicians such as the Chaudhry brothers of Gujrat who head the PMLQ (the ruling party during the Musharraf years) has further raised questions about Imran's claims of fighting corruption and seedy, unprincipled politics.

Doubts are also being expressed about whether the party machinery is robust enough to manage the dynamics that operate on polling day, and which make the critical difference between winning and losing. The overconfidence amongst PTI ranks could yet prove to be the party's Achilles heel. A lot will depend, however, on whether or not the PMLN remains in the fray. If the PMLN stays strong and closes ranks, then the election will be anything but the cakewalk that the PTI thinks it will be. In fact, there is a fair chance that far from leaving the PMLN in disarray, any ham-handed action against Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif would have the opposite effect and galvanise into action the entire ecosystem that the Sharifs have created over the decades, to the detriment of the PTI. While psephology is not widely used in Pakistan, the couple of surveys that have been conducted in the last few weeks reveal that despite all the things that have gone against the PMLN, the party still enjoys a clear lead over the PTI in the opinion polls.¹⁷ If this trend holds till polling day, then PTI's victory is far from being a given.

In the event of tightly fought elections in which the margins of victory are low, the extremist religious parties such as MML and TLYRA will play a crucial

role. While the rule of thumb is that these parties cut into the right-wing vote base of PMLN, the handful of by-elections over the last few months suggest that this might not be the case and in fact they might actually be eating into the PTI vote. The performance of at least the TLYRA has been impressive, even more than that of the MML. Whether the same dynamic will hold in the general elections remains to be seen. If the MML and TLYRA manage to garner the same or even more votes than what they polled in the by-elections, then the contests will become even tighter than what they are expected to be. Although neither of these parties are expected to win any seat, the votes they poll will be important in determining the future trajectory of politics in Pakistan.

CHANGE OR CONTINUITY: KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA & FATA

In the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the contest will be multi-cornered. The province can be divided into four parts – Hazara belt (Abbottabad, Mansehra Haripur etc.), northern district or Malakand region (Swat, Dir, and surrounding areas) Peshwar Valley (Peshawar, Charsadda, Mardan, Swabi) and Southern Districts (DI Khan, Tank, Lakki Marwat). The political dynamics in all four regions is different. In Hazara belt, the competition will be between PMLN and PTI; in Peshawar valley, it will be between ANP, PTI, QWP, MMA and to an extent even the PPP; in Malakand, PMLN and PPP will be competitive in a few constituencies, while the PTI, MMA, ANP will be competitive in almost all constituencies; in the South, the main contenders will be MMA and PTI, with the PPP also being a factor in one or two constituencies.

The norm in KP has been to not re-elect the government. In other words, the voters invariably vote for change. Therefore, the question is whether or not PTI will break the trend. While the PTI has not performed exceptionally, Imran Khan remains popular and there is a possibility that his core support base might still vote for the party because they feel there is a good chance that he will become Prime Minister. Unlike in 2013, however, there is a formidable challenge in the form of an alliance of the mainstream religious parties– Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal comprising the Jamiat Ulema Islam – Fazlur Rehman (JUIF), Jamaat Islami (JI), Jamiat Ahle Hadith, Tehrik-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema Pakistan.¹⁸ However, the presence of MML and TLYRA might cut into the vote bank of the MMA. The Awami National Party (ANP), which fared badly in 2013, is expected to perform much better and that will impact on the PTI. The PMLN could hold on to its bastion in the Hazara belt, but will face a stiffer challenge from a resurgent PTI in this belt. In Malakand and South KP, the MMA will be a potent force and is expected to hold on to its ground.

Although the PTI is expecting to perform much better than in 2013, when it got 17 out of 35 seats, various analysts do not think it will gain more seats. The PTI itself is confident of getting anything between 25 to 30 seats out of 39 that are up for grabs after the new delimitation.¹⁹ A conservative estimate would be PTI getting 12 to 15 seats, PMLN four to five, MMA 10 to 12, ANP three to four, and independents and others (including PPP) capturing the others.

Although the Tribal Belt has now been merged into KP, the current elections will be held on the 12 FATA seats. The general expectation is that these seats will be shared by JUIF, JI and PTI, and independents. The PMLN might sneak into one odd constituency. The x-factor in not just KP but also FATA will be the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM). Although the PTM has declared that it neither endorses nor opposes any party or candidates and is not involved in the election process, some senior PTM leaders have thrown their hat in the ring. The fact that the PTM drew remarkable crowds in its rallies could have an impact in these elections, at least insofar as the PTM leaders contesting elections are concerned. The political consciousness ignited by the PTM could also influence the vote of the youth in KP and FATA.

URBAN CHANGE, RURAL CONTINUITY: SINDH

In the Sindh province, the electoral map can be divided between rural Sindh and urban Sindh (Karachi, Hyderabad). Out of the total 61 directly elected seats, the rural Sindh has around 37 seats and urban Sindh, 24 (21 of them in Karachi).²⁰ The PPP is the dominant force in rural Sindh and while a new alliance, Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) comprising smaller parties like the Pakistan Muslim League – Functional (PMLF) and Qaumi Awami Tehrik, is likely to pose some challenge to the PPP, the party believes it will be able to capture the bulk of seats.²¹ Over the last few years, the PPP leadership has worked overtime to degrade the opposition ranks by roping in many of its powerful and influential adversaries into its fold. As a result, the opposition ranks have been seriously depleted. But the induction of erstwhile foes into the PPP ranks has disturbed the internal coherence of the party and has led to a lot of heartburn among the loyal PPP supporters and workers. It remains to be seen, though, whether this factor impacts on the PPP's winnability in rural Sindh. There is also the whole issue of governance. The governance record of the PPP has been abysmal. It remains to be seen whether this will have an impact in the elections and lead to a shift in the votes against PPP.

The fact that the PPP has managed to extend its patronage network in the province could work in its favour, but if recent developments are any indication,

the 'deep state' seems to be cracking down on PPP lynchpins to make for a more level playing field in rural Sindh. A split verdict in rural Sindh will limit the negotiating position of Asif Zardari playing the kingmaker in Islamabad, something he is banking upon on the basis of a good performance in Sindh. Zardari believes that if he can manage 40 to 50 seats across Pakistan, then he will be in the driving seat in national politics and will hold a veto on who gets to form the next government.²² It is another matter that his political calculations, while seemingly sharp on paper, often go awry on ground.

Even as the electoral picture is not expected to change much in rural Sindh, the story in urban Sindh is completely different. The party that had dominated urban Sindh since 1985 – MQM – has been broken into at least three parts. The MQM will be struggling for survival, riven as it is with deep divisions and fissures. A breakaway faction – Pak Sarzameen Party (PSP) – which has been propped up by the 'deep state' to cut the MQM to size, is likely to take away a bulk of MQM votes. In addition, the rump MQM is divided on factional lines, and though these divisions have been papered over for the elections, the grapevine is that official candidates will be sabotaged from within. There is also the problem of a boycott call issued by the former MQM supremo, Altaf Husain.²³ If the loyal MQM supporters heed the boycott call, then it is curtains for the MQM, and perhaps also the PSP. The Mohajir voter who forms the bulk of the MQM votebank comprises close to 48 percent of the Karachi electorate.²⁴ A large number of these voters not exercising their vote will mean political death for the MQM. Adding to MQM's problems is the new delimitation. In 2002, the MQM had gerrymandered the constituencies to cement its vote bank. But the new delimitations have divided the MQM vote bank and included other ethnic groups in constituencies which until now were dominated by the Mohajirs. This means that the MQM will desperately need every voter to come out and vote for it. The most optimistic estimate for both PSP and MQM is that they will be lucky if they cross the two-figure mark. In other words, both PSP and MQM should be happy if their combined tally crosses double figures.

The delimitation is expected to add a few seats to the PPP's kitty. While some PPP leaders believe they could win up to 10 seats from Karachi, a more realistic assessment is that the PPP could go from its traditional one seat to around two to four.²⁵ The PTI had a great chance to become an alternative to MQM after the 2013 elections, but the party ignored Karachi and lost out. It might still manage one or two seats but is not likely to sweep Karachi. The PMLN, which never had much of a presence in the megapolis, is expected to take out one or two seats on the back of its Punjabi vote bank which, after delimitation, has a good chance to assert itself politically in the city. The

surprise package might be the MMA. The religious parties have always had a solid support base in Karachi. Before the ascent of MQM, Karachi was a stronghold of the JI and JUP. The formation of the MMA and the degradation of MQM has improved the chances of the religious parties to recover lost political ground. On the other hand, the entry of MML and TLYRA along with the other groups such as the Sunni extremist party, Ahle Sunnat wal Jamaat (ASWJ, fighting under the banner of Pakistan Rah-i-Haq party), could cut into the votes of the MMA.

The bottomline is that unlike the past elections when the results in Karachi could be predicted with a fair amount of certainty, this time the city is up for grabs and it is difficult to foretell the score of each party. This means that the sort of swing player role that the MQM played in the past will no longer be possible. Nevertheless, with 21 seats, Karachi could well decide who gets to form the next government in Islamabad.

BALUCHISTAN MUDDLE

With only 16 seats at stake, there is little interest among the mainstream national parties in Balochistan,²⁶ and the province hardly figures in the entire election discourse. In a way, the election in Balochistan is a bit of a sideshow. The province can be broadly divided into two parts: north Balochistan which is the Pashtun belt, and south Balochistan which is the Baloch belt. The southern part can be further subdivided into three distinct areas: the eastern part of the province where traditionally pro-Pakistan elements have won; the central part which has been the hub of nationalist politics; and the southern Makran belt, which has been for the better part of the decade the hub of Baloch separatism spearheaded by the Baloch Liberation Front. In the last election, the voting percentage in the southern Makran was in single digits.

Balochistan politics is highly fragmented and national parties have not had much presence. More than the party, the politics is dominated by personalities or electables, most of them tribal chiefs. Even the regional parties such as the Pashtun party, PKMAP or the Baloch nationalist party, BNP (Mengal) or even the National Party (mostly middle-class) revolve around personalities.²⁷ The oppressive security presence in the province and the more than decade-long insurgency, coupled with the alienation of the Baloch, has created a tinder-box like situation and limited the scope for free and fair elections.

The military has engineered a new party, the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), comprising 'electables' from both the Baloch and Pashtun

communities.²⁸ BAP is expected to put up a strong showing in the province. The NP and PKMAP, which was aligned to the PMLN and formed a coalition government after the 2013 elections, appear to have lost favour of the establishment and worse, of their constituents. At best, these two parties could take two or three seats each. The BNP-M is hoping to do well at the expense of the NP in some of the Baloch areas; doing well means two to three National Assembly seats.²⁹ The PMLN might be able to garner one or two seats. MMA, especially its JUJIF part, has a strong presence in the province and could improve its performance at the expense of PKMAP.

SCENARIOS AND PROJECTIONS

In the 2013 election, it was widely predicted that Pakistan would end up with a hung house. No one expected that the PPP would get so comprehensively wiped out from Punjab and other provinces. Nor did anyone expect the PTI to get just about half a dozen seats in Punjab. Or for that matter, no one expected PMLN which was seen as the frontrunner to win nearly 125 seats in the elections. The best estimates gave PMLN 90 to 100 seats. In a way, the 100-seat mark is the tipping point and any party that reaches this figure, can easily form the government with the help of independents who naturally gravitate to this party and with the support of smaller parties.

Although there is an anti-defection law in Pakistan, if the verdict in 2018 is badly split, or if a coalition formation is subject to hard bargaining, then the chances of the 'deep state' intervening and forming another 'patriot' faction from amongst the other parties cannot be ruled out. This is a real possibility, with a judiciary that is pliable and compliant to the military's diktats.

It is important to remember that often there is a tendency to underestimate the seats of the winner. Generally, it is observed that if a party crosses the 100-mark, then it ends up close to 110 to 120, which allows it to be the first choice of independents who by law are required to join a party after the election within a given time period. If they do not, then they stay as independent or unattached members.

The following are the broad scenarios that are likely to result from Pakistan's coming general elections:


- 1) PTI is a clear winner with 110+ seats of its own and easily cobbles together a majority in the National Assembly, with the help of independents and smaller parties. The PMLN will end up with 45 to 55

seats in this case and will lead the opposition. The PPP will be third with 30 to 40 seats. The MMA will garner 15 to 20 seats.

- 2) PTI emerges as the single largest party with 80 to 90 seats. This will complicate the process of coalition formation, especially since Imran Khan has publicly declared that he will not enter into any post-poll alliance with the PPP. It will also be impossible for Imran Khan to strike a deal with either the MMA or PMLN, and the smaller parties such as the ANP. The independents will probably not have the numbers to give him a majority. In this scenario, the PMLN will be a close second with 70 to 75 seats, the PPP will control around 50 seats, and the MMA between 20 to 25 seats.
- 3) PMLN manages to emerge as the single largest party with 80-odd seats. This will be a bleak scenario for the establishment that has worked hard to oust the PMLN. The PMLN could be tempted to attempt forming a government with the support of PPP, ANP, MMA and other parties. The PMLN president Shahbaz Sharif has declared that he is keen to have a national government. In this scenario, the PTI will be around 60 to 70 seats, PPP 45 to 55, MMA 20 to 25 and independents, 20 to 25.

One can also imagine a scenario of the PMLN repeating its 2013 performance, but that is rather farfetched at this point in time. There is also an alternate scenario in which the smaller parties and independents emerge as the single largest bloc in the National Assembly and a coalition is cobbled with some help from the 'deep state'. To some degree, this will be a repeat of what happened in Balochistan after the collapse of the PMLN government following a rebellion in its ranks; subsequently, an unknown person was foisted as Chairman Senate with the support of both PTI and PPP.

Another factor that needs to be considered is that along with the National Assembly polls, the elections are also taking place for the provincial assemblies. The post-poll arrangements for the National Assembly cannot be completely divorced from what transpires at the provincial level. Perhaps support at the centre could end up being contingent on the support in the province, assuming that the provincial results do not conform to the same pattern as the National Assembly results. That is to say, it is possible that PTI might get more seats in the National Assembly from Punjab but the PMLN gets more seats in the Punjab Provincial Assembly. Or in Sindh, the PPP might not be able to form a government on its own without the support of the MMA, which makes support contingent on PPP not supporting PTI at the centre. In other words, the

inclusion of Provincial Assembly results would complicate the political permutations and combinations. 

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