

Pakistan General Elections 2018: Analysis of Results and Implications

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ABSTRACT

In July 2018, Pakistanis voted in what was the third consecutive transfer of power from one civilian government to another in the country's 71-year history. The elections may be called a success in that winners had been declared. However, the months leading up to the elections demonstrated the power of the military, and its ability to influence election outcomes and control sections of the media. As Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader Imran Khan seemed poised for a win, opposition parties cried foul, stating that the election was stolen from them. In the following months, as analysts and psephologists ran the data, interesting trends emerged. This report presents an analysis of Pakistan's 2018 general elections and what the results mean for the future of the country.

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INTRODUCTION

Like most elections in Pakistan, the 2018 general polls were mired in controversy. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan termed the elections the “dirtiest, most micromanaged” in the country’s history.¹ The pre-poll manipulation and political engineering to deny a level playing field to all the political parties and favour one party – Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) – had already tainted the electoral process and raised serious questions about the fairness of the elections. The colossal mismanagement on voting day, in particular the counting of votes and the inexplicable delays in declaring results in a metropolis like Karachi, fed into the perception that the elections had been rigged. Finally, the post-poll manipulation – corralling the independents and smaller parties towards the PTI so that it gets the necessary numbers to form the government in Islamabad as well as the provincial government in Lahore – only strengthened the perception that the entire system was working to ensure a PTI government.

In the runup to the election, sections of the mainstream media including newspapers and TV stations experienced restrictions in their reporting. *Dawn*, a leading newspaper, was subject to intimidation, harassment, and a ban on its sale in certain areas, after it reported of a meeting between members of the civilian government (led by PML-N) and the Army and a growing ideological rift between the two. Cable operators were instructed to take *Dawn*’s TV channels (Geo News and Dawn News) off the air and the paper suffered massive cuts in revenue after advertisers were told not to promote their products in those media houses.² Popular journalists and media persons were picked up, questioned and later released.³ TV stations that have earlier aired reports that were unfavourable to Imran Khan or the military saw a blackout in their coverage in certain parts of the country. *Geo TV* and its Urdu newspaper *Jang* were subjected to financial pressures and intimidation that forced them to not pay their staff for three months, until senior editors appeared to have reached a compromise with the military.⁴

What was more disturbing was the apparent indifference of the country’s judiciary. By not taking action against the harassment of journalists and threats against free speech, the judiciary fanned the fire of self-censorship.⁵ In what was regarded as a “judicial coup” three months before the election, the Supreme Court disqualified former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from contesting elections, on charges of corruption. The sentencing of Sharif, his daughter and son-in-law was widely seen as a targeted assassination of the politician’s career.⁶

Even as the polls lacked integrity, however, the results and the voting patterns that emerged after the polling, show certain trends that need to be analysed. At the least, the ability of the ‘deep state’ to fix the field to put one party in first position is indicative of the continuing power and influence of the establishment. The implications of this for Pakistan’s politics, the future of democracy and the principle of civilian supremacy in policymaking—especially in the realm of foreign and security policy—are not encouraging. Besides the establishment-driven manipulation, the poll results indicate significant shifts in voting behaviour and preferences, the patterns of which were already being speculated on the eve of elections.

The final result was not entirely a surprise: PTI emerged as the single largest party but short of a majority in the National Assembly. What was unexpected was the numbers that PTI ultimately obtained and the places these seats came from. On the eve of the elections, the general consensus among the pundits was that PTI will get between 90-100 seats. The eventual tally of 115 was the most optimistic scenario, even as no one was sure where the extra 15-20 seats would come from. The erstwhile ruling party – Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) – was expected to be the runner-up provided there was no last-minute upsurge or wave in its favour. The Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) was the third largest party, possibly holding the balance of power in the National Assembly, something that was being pitched for by the co-chair of the party, former president Asif Zardari. By gaining the support of a number of independent candidates and smaller parties like PMLQ, BNP-M, BAP and MQM, the PTI was able to cross the halfway mark and form a government without having to seek the PPP’s support.

More than the overall number of seats and votes garnered by the various political players, what is interesting is the provincial and subregional breakdown of the results, and what it portends for Pakistani politics in the years ahead. Mapping the victories of the different parties across the constituencies is revealing.⁷ The PTI swept KP, and the entire swathe of territory in north, west and south Punjab. The PMLN scored victories primarily in the eastern and central parts of Punjab, straddling the border with India. While this region is in many ways the centre of gravity of Punjab politics and is the most populous part of the province, the fact that PMLN was restricted to one corner of Punjab is something that should worry the party. The PPP scored 90 percent of its wins in rural Sindh while Karachi (urban Sindh) was dominated by the PTI. It is only in Balochistan where a patchwork of

the victors' colours can be found, and it is explained by the fragmented nature of the verdict. Equally important are the emerging trends of how some of the traditional political players are losing ground and new ones are marking their footprint.

PROVINCIAL BREAKDOWN OF RESULTS

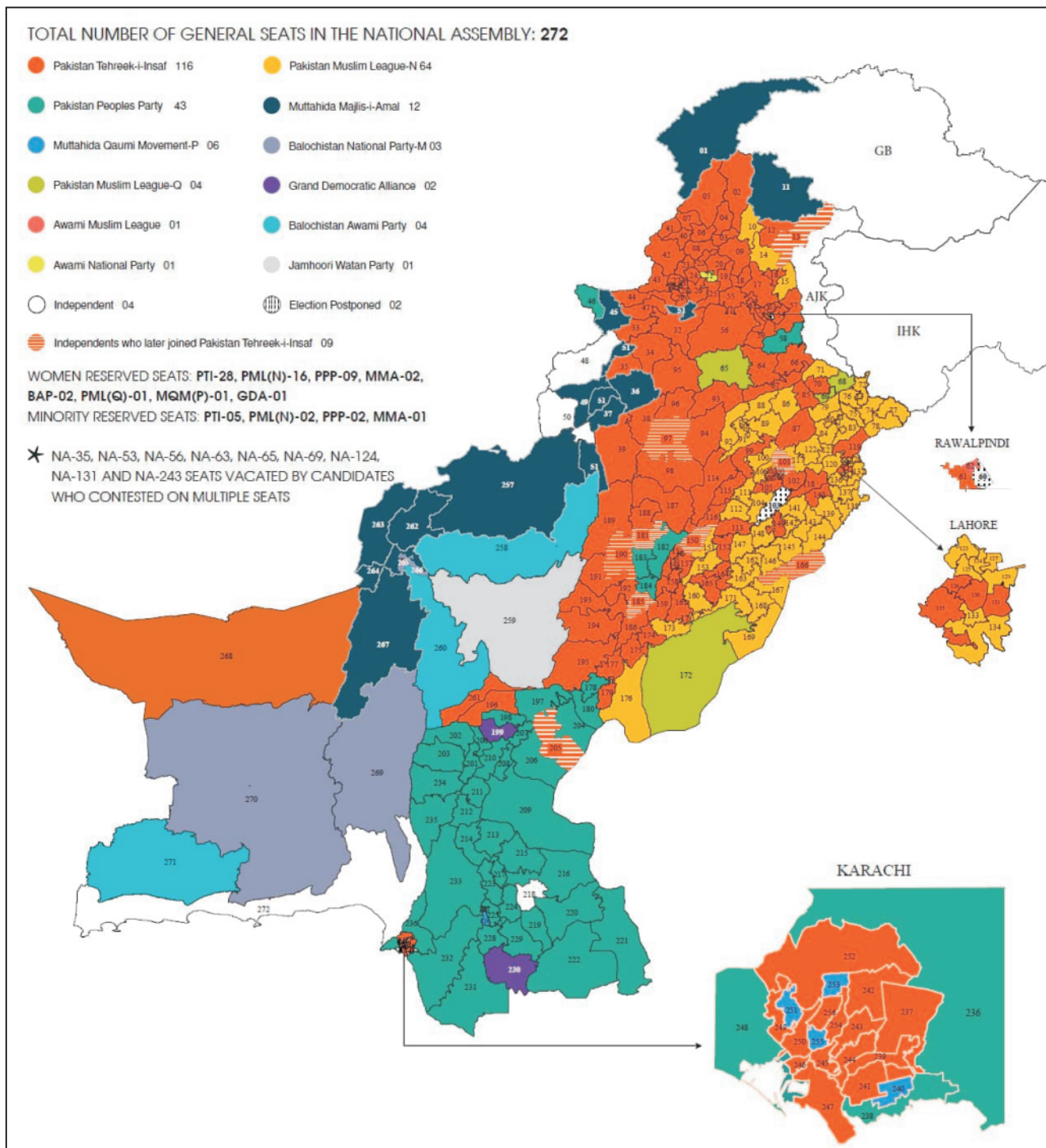
Table: Seats Distribution (Directly Elected Seats)

PROVINCE	REGION	SEATS	PARTY POSITIONS												
			PTI	PMLN	IND	MMA	PPP				PMLQ	Oth.			
PUNJAB	North Punjab (1)	13	9				1					1	1		
	Central Punjab (1)	82	27	50	2							2			
	South Punjab	46	25	11	4		5					1			
	Total	141													
								ANP							
KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA	Malakand	10	8	1		1									
	Hazara	7	3	1	1	1						1			
	Peshawar Valley	14	13					1							
	South KP	8	6			2									
	Total	39													
									MQM-P	GDA					
SINDH	Urban	24	14				4		6						
	Rural	37	1		2		32			2					
	Total	61													
											BAP	BNP-M			
BALOCHISTAN	Pashtun belt	5				4						1			
	East Balochistan	2	1								1				
	Central Balochistan	6	1			2					1	1		1	
	Makran	3			1						2				
	Total	16													
ISLAMABAD		3	3												
FATA		12	6		2	3	1								
TOTAL SEATS		272													
			117	63	12	13	43	1	6	2	4	2	5	2	270
			PTI	PMLN	IND	MMA	PPP	ANP	MQM-P	GDA	BAP	BNP-M	PMLQ	Otrs.	

Broadly, if the National Assembly results are seen on a provincial basis, the PTI has swept Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (including the Tribal Areas which are now merged in the province), Punjab has been shared between PTI and PMLN, with both parties getting the same number of seats – 61 – and the balance shared by independents, PPP and PMLQ. In Sindh, the PPP swept rural Sindh while the PTI won handsomely in urban Sindh. Balochistan, expectedly enough, threw a

split verdict. But the newly formed Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) which was believed to be a creation of the ‘establishment’ which brought together all the ‘electables’ under the BAP umbrella, won four seats. The Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNPM) made a comeback with three seats. The rest were taken by PTI (two) and Muttahid Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) (five), Jamhoori Watan Party (one) and independent (one). The following section presents a disaggregated analysis of the provincial results.

Figure 1: Poll results in colours



Source: Dawn, 18 August 2018.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, PTI broke the past record of the incumbent not getting re-elected. The party has surprised most pundits by sweeping all the four regions of KP, winning 30 seats and surpassing its performance in 2013 where it won 17. If the election in 2013 marked the routing of the Awami National Party in the province, this election spelt the end of PML-N's influence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: the party won two seats, compared to four in 2013.⁸

In the Hazara belt where the PMLN was believed to be strong, the PTI won three of the seven seats and the PMLN could win only one. In the Malakand region (Swat and its adjoining areas) the Awami National Party (ANP) and PPP along with the PMLN and MMA were expected to pose a stiff challenge to the PTI. And yet, the PTI won eight out of 10 seats, with the MMA and PMLN winning one each. The Peshawar valley was a complete whitewash, with the PTI winning 13 out of 14 seats and the ANP managing to scrape through, winning one seat with the slimmest of margins (35 votes) in Mardan. The Peshawar valley was seen to signal a revival of the ANP and other parties, including MMA, were expecting to perform much better than they did. However, neither the ANP nor the Quami Watan Party (QWP) of Aftab Sherpao (both of them holding aloft the flag of old-school Pashtun nationalism) made any impression at the hustings. The MMA—which had hoped to win a few seats based on a simple addition of the votes won by the two main component parties, Jamiat Ulema Islam – Fazlur Rehman group (JUIF) and Jamaat Islami (JI), in the 2013 elections—was decimated in the centre of gravity of KP politics. The southern districts of KP also held a rude surprise for the MMA and in particular for the JUIF chief, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who lost in both the seats he contested. Out of the eight seats in South KP, the PTI won six and the MMA was reduced to two.

FATA

While FATA is not a separate province, this report is treating it as such for a regional analysis. The region delivered the biggest shock for the MMA – the alliance of religious parties that had hoped its consolidated vote bank would challenge the PTI. The PTI won six out of 12 seats. Equally significant was the victory of two of the leaders of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) who fought as independent candidates. The victory in North Waziristan and South Waziristan of the PTM leaders is testimony to the traction that the movement has gained in the Pashtun community. Despite the PTM having announced that it would be neither supporting nor nominating any candidate in the elections

and would remain a non-political movement, two of its main leaders won. It is a nascent sign of the revival of a neo-Pashtun nationalist movement which is causing enormous disquiet within the ‘establishment’. The MMA could only manage three seats in FATA which was supposed to be one of its bastions. One possible reason could be the opposition to the merger of FATA with KP being spearheaded by Maulana Fazlur Rehman.

Punjab

Punjab was always expected to be the main battleground in the 2018 elections. With 141 seats out of the 272 directly elected seats in the National Assembly, Punjab was a critical province to win for both the PMLN and PTI. By winning only 61 seats, the PMLN which had been in power for the last two terms (2008 and 2013) failed to secure simple majority.

The province can be broadly broken down in three regions. One is North Punjab or the Potohar region, constituting what is often referred to as the “martial belt” or the area from where the bulk of the Pakistan army is recruited. Elections were held on 12 out of the 13 seats in this belt. The PMLN, which had a strong presence in the region, was unable to score a single seat. The PTI and its allies won 11 out of the 12 seats, and the PPP managed one. Add to this the three seats from Islamabad capital territory, all of which the PTI won, and the sweep of the entire northern Punjab is quite remarkable. The anti-establishment and anti-military posture of the PMLN, especially of Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam, probably swayed a large part of the voters towards the PTI. Yet another factor that harmed the PMLN was the divisions within its ranks. The side-lining of a stalwart leader like Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan who fought as an independent is also believed to have split the PMLN vote in a number of constituencies in north Punjab.

In Central Punjab, the bastion of the PMLN, the party managed to hold on to 50 out of the 82 seats, putting up a fairly good performance. The party’s vote bank in this region largely stayed intact, given the sympathy factor – the conviction of Nawaz Sharif and his daughter in the Panama Papers case – that worked in favour of the PMLN. More importantly, the political engineering project of the ‘deep state’ which was quite successful in South Punjab and also had some impact on north Punjab, did not really work in central Punjab. The PMLN neither split nor were there any major desertions from the party in this stronghold. Nevertheless, the PTI made significant gains in central Punjab. The party won 27 seats and another two were won by its informal ally PMLQ.

South Punjab was really where the entire electoral game could be changed. The 11 districts of southern Punjab make up 31.58 percent of Punjab's local population. The 2017 Census handed three more seats to south Punjab in both the national and Punjab assemblies. This meant that 46 National Assembly seats and 94 Punjab provincial Assembly seats, are crucial in terms of making or breaking a government.⁹

The 46 seats in South Punjab were always going to be a tough task for the PMLN. This was the region where the political engineering was the most brazen. PMLN candidates were forced to switch loyalties, in some cases after the last date of filing nominations, leaving the PMLN without candidates in more than half a dozen seats. Even otherwise, many of the 'electables' had deserted the PMLN on the eve of the elections. Some of them fought on PTI tickets and others as independents. The bottomline was that the PMLN was virtually left without any sort of a party organisation. The sudden resurrection of the South Punjab province demand became the excuse for many of the desertions from the PMLN, though it does not seem to have made much of an impression with the voters. A far more potent issue, however, was the *khatm-e-nabuwat* (finality of the Prophet) controversy which saw many of the shrines turn against the PMLN and make a beeline for the PTI.¹⁰

Despite the big setbacks faced by the PMLN, the fact that the party won 11 seats and even managed to defeat some of the important *gaddi-nasheens* who had spearheaded the campaign against the PMLN was creditable. Expectedly enough, the PTI won big in South Punjab, picking up 26 seats (including one of PMLQ) out of 46. The PPP managed to win four seats from this region. Although all these were won by traditional feudal electables belonging to the party, the fact that the PPP managed to pick up a few seats in Punjab has kept its hopes alive for a revival in the province. This seems highly unlikely as an analysis of PPP performance in Punjab suggests that it is virtually on the verge of extinction in the province as in most constituencies in central and northern region, where the PPP candidates got votes in the low thousands and were nowhere in the fray.

In Punjab, there were some interesting outcomes, first of which was the big loss suffered by the independents. Unlike in the 2013 election when 12 independent candidates won in Punjab, in 2018 only six independents managed to win, four of them from South Punjab. The pre-poll speculation of influential 'electables', most of them fighting on the symbol of jeep, becoming a swing block in the National Assembly was proved wrong. What is more, many of the 'electables' who preferred to fight as independents especially in South

Punjab lost their seats. Of course, in the provincial assembly, the independents did emerge as the third largest party, winning nearly 6.2 million votes and capturing 30 provincial assembly seats. In fact, the provincial government in Punjab was formed only after almost all these independents were corralled to join the PTI which enabled it to marginally cross the halfway mark with the support of smaller parties like PMLQ. At the national level, with around 6.1 million votes, the independents emerged as the fourth largest ‘party’.¹¹

The second interesting outcome in Punjab was the sweeping victories by the main parties in clusters of seats from a particular area or city. For instance, in Sialkot, Narowal, Gujranwala, Sargodha, Kasur, Okara and Pakpattan, all seats were won by PMLN. The PTI managed a similar feat in Gujrat (in alliance with PMLQ), Khushab, Mianwali, Jhang, Multan, Layyah, Dera Ghazi Khan and Rajanpur. In the two biggest cities of Punjab, the PMLN won the bulk of the seats in Lahore while the PTI in Faisalabad. The PPP too won three of its four seats in South Punjab from Muzaffargarh.

Sindh

In Sindh, the election results were largely according to expectations. The PPP was expected to win bulk of the rural seats in Sindh, notwithstanding the challenge from the Grand Democratic Alliance. However, the scale of the PPP victory did come as a surprise, with even stalwarts like the Pir of Pagara and the former minister Ghulam Murtaza Jatoi losing their seats to PPP candidates. Out of the 37 rural seats in Sindh, the PPP won 32 with the GDA limited to just two seats. Given the feckless governance of the PPP, the only explanation for the result is the political management by the party in the province where virtually every important opposition leader had been roped into the party, leaving the GDA with little to work with at the hustings.

The real surprise, and perhaps may even be called a tectonic shift, was witnessed in urban Sindh – the 21 seats in Karachi and three in Hyderabad. Since the mid-1980s, urban Sindh had been dominated by the MQM. The first clue of the weakening of MQM’s hold came during the 2013 elections when the PTI emerged as a major challenger in Karachi. Since then, a number of political developments have meant that the MQM has taken a beating both ideologically and organisationally.

MQM chief Altaf Hussein’s provocative speech at the Karachi Press Club in August 2016, was the final nail in the coffin for the party. Paramilitary forces sealed MQM offices, arrested top party members with targeted disappearances

of MQM cadre. Hussein's speech and subsequent action by the deep state, led to the splintering of the party. The MQM-Pakistan, led by Farooq Sattar, focused their 2018 campaign on distancing themselves from Altaf Hussein and holding the seats they won under the MQM in 2013. Another faction, led by Mustafa Kamal who left the MQM in 2014, is Pakistan Sarzameen Party (PSP), which was seen to be enjoying the blessings of the deep state. The idea behind the creation and backing of the PSP was to not only eat into the MQM votes, but counter the PPP in Sindh.¹²

The new delimitation also affected the MQM vote bank by undoing the gerrymandering that the MQM had done during the Musharraf era. What was worse was the boycott call issued by Altaf Hussain which seems to have also impacted on the MQM's prospects. According to the ECP, the average voter turnout in Karachi dropped from 55 percent in 2013 to a mere 40 percent in 2018.¹³ While there was a boycott by MQM supporters, voters in the Mohajir areas rejected the Altaf Hussein's boycott appeal and instead voted overwhelmingly for Imran Khan.¹⁴

Even so, the MQM was hopeful of winning at least a dozen, if not more seats. But the new political realities in Karachi also allowed the PPP to hope for reaching double figures in the megapolis. The PTI was considered a strong contender especially since it obtained the second highest number of votes in Karachi in 2013. However, the fact that after 2013, there was virtually no major effort to build the support base of the PTI led many pundits to believe that the PTI would not manage more than a handful of seats. Even the PMLN and MMA were confident of snatching a few seats in Karachi. The results came as a big surprise for all the political players: the PTI won 14 out of the 21 seats in Karachi. In fact, the extra 20-25 seats that the PTI got in the National Assembly appear to have come primarily from Karachi and FATA, and to an extent North Punjab and KP. This is notwithstanding the fact that the lowest voter turnout was in areas of Karachi that were won by the PTI, while the highest voter turnout was in constituencies won by PPP.¹⁵

The MQM was reduced to only four seats in Karachi, down from 17 seats it won in 2013. The MQM won another two seats from Hyderabad, taking its total tally to six. PPP managed to win only three seats in Karachi, losing in its pocket borough Lyari for the first time since the 1970s. The biggest loser in urban Sindh was the PSP which neither won any seat nor got many votes. Despite positioning itself as the representative of the Mohajir community, the PSP was completely rejected, obtaining only a small fraction of the votes polled by MQM-Pakistan. The PSP vote was so low that it was not even able to play

spoiler for MQM in most seats, winning only 3.8 percent of the total 7.57 million registered votes in the city.¹⁶ For the MQM the dilemma is that by throwing in its lot with the PTI – the grapevine is that this was under pressure from the ‘deep state’ – it might win some temporary relief. In the long run, however, given that PTI and MQM vie for the same vote bank, it could be risking irrelevance. Already, some MQM and PSP cadres have switched sides and joined the PTI.¹⁷ The atrophying of the MQM will have implications for the politics of Karachi, more so since the alienation and disaffection among the Mohajir community will continue to rise with its growing marginalisation, in turn effecting the MQM’s future. It remains to be seen whether the Mohajirs will continue with the PTI, or whether the MQM or the MQM-P would evolve and change the theme of its politics.

Balochistan

Expectedly, in Balochistan, the verdict was split at the provincial level. The MMA put up a fairly good performance, especially in the Pashtun belt and won four out of its five seats in the province from here. The Pashtun nationalist, Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), suffered serious losses in its bastion at the hands of the MMA. The other big loser was the National Party, which represented pro-federation, middle-class Baloch nationalists. The NP was not able to win a single seat in the province. What was common between the NP and PkMAP was that both were allies of Nawaz Sharif and part of the erstwhile ruling coalition in Balochistan before an ‘establishment’-driven palace coup d’etat ousted the PMLN-led coalition and forged a new government a few months before the general elections. Quite like its allies, the PMLN too came a cropper in Balochistan as did the PPP. Apart from the MMA, the other big winners were the ‘establishment’s’ party, Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), formed with dissidents from PMLN and PMLQ, which won four seats and the Balochistan National Party of Akhtar Mengal which scored three. The PTI opened its account in Balochistan for the first time and won two seats. At the provincial level, however, the BAP emerged as the single largest party and was able to cobble together a government with the support of PTI, ANP and other smaller parties and independents.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The Rise of the Far-Right

The most noteworthy and significant takeaway from the elections has been the rise of the far-right parties. Overall, the religious parties got around 5.25

million votes (including some jihadist leaders who fought as independents) which was approximately 10 percent of the total votes polled for the National Assembly elections.¹⁸ This has been a significant increase from 2013 where religious parties received barely five percent of the polled votes.¹⁹

The Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), the aggressive face of Barelvi politics, emerged as the fifth largest party in terms of votes received nationally. The group rose from the protests following the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who assassinated Punjab Governor Salman Taseer in 2011. By exalting Qadri as a hero, the TLP was able to garner a large following, eventually emerging as the single largest religious political party in Pakistan, bigger than both JUIF and JI.²⁰ During the TLP's campaign, the party targeted the PMLN, causing a major dent in their vote bank in Punjab. A Gallup survey shows that 46 percent of those who voted for the TLP in 2018 said that they had voted for PMLN in 2013.²¹ The survey also shows that between 2013 and 2018 general elections, the PMLN lost nine percent of its vote bank nationally; from this, three to four percent was lost to the TLP, and not the PTI. Surpassing the PPP, in terms of the number of votes received in Punjab, the TLP emerged as the third largest party in the province, with four out of every five votes polled for the party coming from Punjab. In addition, there are 14 NA constituencies in Punjab, where the PMLN lost and TLP received more votes than the difference between votes polled by the returned candidates and runners up. In other words, the margin of victory in these constituencies is less than the votes polled by TLP.²²

In Sindh, the TLP succeeded by taking advantage of the political vacuum created by Altaf Hussein's controversial speech. By using the pulpit of the mosque, the TLP was able to spread their political message.²³ TLP candidates were in the top three parties, in 21 percent of the constituencies in the province, marking its entry into Sindhi politics. Data from the ECP shows that TLP's impressive performance in Karachi saw it winning 12 percent of all votes, performing far better than the PMLN (eight percent of Karachi votes) and PSP (less than five percent).²⁴

The TLP's performance is significant because it is indicative of the revival of Barelvi sectarian politics which had steadily lost ground to the more aggressive and assertive JI and Deobandi groups. The latter had been receiving state patronage starting from the 1980s. The traditional Barelvi party, Jamaat Ulema Pakistan (JUP), had lost a lot of ground and got fragmented into different factions. Other expressions of Barelvi assertion like the Sunni Tehrik, Jamaat Ahle Sunnat and Sunni Ittehad Council failed to make any impression in the elections.²⁵ The TLP, however, has changed the narrative and is the most

potent expression of Barelvi aggression and assertion. The idiom, the pitch and the technology that the TLP has deployed to connect with the voter worked, as well as its aggressiveness in empowering the Barelvis who have for decades been on the receiving end of Deobandi and Wahabi groups. The TLP was even able to browbeat candidates to surrender PMLN tickets.²⁶ One indication of its power and influence is that Imran Khan's third wife, Bushra Maneka a.k.a. Pinky Pirni, who is closely linked to the Barelvi school and is considered a clairvoyant of sorts, had advised him against taking on the TLP and kowtowing to it on the issue of khatm-e-nabuwat.²⁷

The TLP's electoral performance has serious implications for religious politics in Pakistan. The party has shown that unabashed extremism and unrestrained religious rhetoric pays electoral dividends. The worry is that this template will now be replicated by the other mainstream religious parties like JUIF and JI which will be forced to take a more strident and uncompromising stand on religious issues to consolidate their vote bank and prevent new players like TLP from attracting their voters and supporters.

In terms of both total votes and seats, the performance of the religious parties was not impressive. The TLP managed to win only two provincial assembly seats in Sindh. The MMA, on the other hand, which was formed as an alliance for various religious parties, was able to win a dozen seats in the National Assembly, all from KP and Balochistan. Indeed, many of the religious parties have lost ground. Yet, the emergence of new parties like the TLP have stirred the religious pot, indicating a shift in the religious vote to the more radical and hardline parties. Interestingly, while the TLP has performed well in Punjab and Sindh (especially Karachi), the traditional religious parties like JI and JUIF have garnered a fairly respectable share of votes in KP and Balochistan. In both these provinces, the religious parties have garnered close to 20 percent of the vote in the provincial elections.²⁸ Perhaps one important reason for the MMA managing to win seats in the two western provinces was that bulk of its vote was concentrated in these two provinces while the TLP vote in Punjab was spread out more thinly.

Delimitation

Delimitation is the process of dividing up a country's total area into smaller units to conduct elections in a more efficient manner. As the total area of where elections are happening gets divided into smaller pieces, constituencies are formed, which are supposed to be representative of population groupings. A constitutional amendment in December 2017 allowed the Election

Commission of Pakistan to use the provisional data from the 2017 Census to delimit constituencies for the 2018 election.²⁹

The delimitation before the 2018 elections, however, raised significant questions about the process in which it was done. The law requires constituencies to be on average of equal in population. While the average population per National assembly seat is approximately 780,000, there are large differences in population size in a number of constituencies. While a populous constituency may have more than a million, another has a population far below the national average; yet both have the same number of seats. There are 31 unusually large or small constituencies: 10 in Punjab, nine in Sindh, eight in KP and four in Balochistan.

Rejected Votes and Small Winning Margins

According to FAFEN, there has been an 11.7-percent increase in the number of ballots that were rejected in the 2018 elections. FAFEN analysis shows that from 2002, there has been a steady increase in the rejected votes in every election (See Table below)³⁰

Province	Rejected Votes 2002	Rejected Votes 2008	Rejected Votes 2012	Votes Excluded From Count 2018
KP and FATA	88,036	1,00,948	1,90,597	2,48,941
Islamabad	1,881	1,531	2,448	4,942
Punjab	5,08,926	6,38,623	8,50,735	9,06,952
Sindh	1,31,426	1,85,703	3,81,757	4,08,613
Balochistan	45,451	46,889	77,180	1,08,558
Overall	7,75,720	9,73,694	15,02,717	16,78,006
Increase		1,97,974	5,29,023	1,75,289
		25.5%	54.3%	11.7%

The fact that there is such a large number of votes that are ‘rejected’ or ‘invalid’ is concerning, as in 49 National Assembly constituencies, the rejected ballots surpassed the margin of victory. In other words, the rejected ballots are enough to make up the difference between the winning and the losing candidate. Among these NA constituencies, 26 are in Punjab, 11 in Sindh, and six each in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In terms of the party-wise distribution of these 49 seats, 21 were won by PTI, 11 by PMLN, six by PPP, three by BAP, two by GDA, two by independents and one each by MMA, ANP, PMLQ and JWP.³¹

There seems to be no discernible pattern in which party wins such seats. In the 2008 election which was won by the PPP, there were 45 seats where the number of rejected seats was larger than the margin of victory. The PMLQ won 16 seats while the PPP won only eight. Similarly in 2013, where the PMLN emerged victorious at the national level, there were 34 seats where a margin of victory was less than the rejected votes, the PMLN won 12 seats or 35.2 percent.³²

The 2018 election was also significant for the level of political polarisation in the country—there was a large number of close contests, and there were constituencies where the margin of victory between the winner and loser was less than 10 percent. The Election Act, 2017 provides that the ballot papers at a polling station can only be recounted if a contesting candidate requests so in writing and if the margin of victory is less than five percent of the total votes polled in the constituency of 10,000, whichever is less. In the 2018 election there were 79 such constituencies—16 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 41 in Punjab, 15 in Sindh and seven in Balochistan.

To illustrate a few examples, in KP's NA- 13 (Manshera), the winning independent candidate defeated the PMLN candidate by only 1,474 votes, while the number of rejected votes was 7,600. In Sindh's NA-230 (Badin), where 10,263 votes were rejected, the winner had a margin of only 860 votes over the PPP candidate. In Punjab's NA-94, the difference between the margin of victory and the number of rejected votes was marginal with 8,755 votes cast for the winner and 8,757 votes rejected.³³

Some Pakistani analysts believe the numbers of rejected votes cannot be viewed in isolation and must be compared with the patterns over the years. After all, as the population of Pakistan increases, so do the number of people voting, i.e. the rise in the number of rejected votes is directly proportional to the increase in the population, therefore there are more 'mistakes' leading to invalid votes.³⁴

CONCLUSION

Total Votes Polled:

Party Name	2013 Election	2018 Election
PTI	7.6 million votes	16.8 million votes
PMLN	14.8 million	12.89 million
PPP	6.91 million	6.9 million
Independents	5.8 million	6 million
MMA	JUIF: 1.4 million + JI: 960,000	2.5 million
TLP	-	2.2 million

Total National Assembly Seats Won:

Party Name	2013 Election	2018 Election
PTI	35	149
PMLN	166	82
PPP	42	54

The results show that PTI not only made major gains in terms of seats in parliament but also significantly expanded on their vote bank across Pakistan. From winning 7.6 million votes and 27 seats in the National Assembly in 2013, the PTI is now the largest party in the country with 16.8 million votes and 149 seats in the National Assembly. Going into the elections as incumbents, the PMLN had an uphill battle, fighting off allegations of corruption and poor governance. They were highly unsuccessful, losing their share of seats in the National Assembly from 125 in 2013 to 82, and failing to win the most number of votes in any province, including Punjab which was supposedly its stronghold. The PPP has been pushed back further into irrelevancy in all provinces, except Sindh where it remains the largest party. As for the MMA, they maintain their relevancy by winning 2.5 million votes, or 4.4 percent of the total votes polled. The TLP, whose rise was the most disturbing development of the 2018 election, failed to win any National Assembly seats but managed to win two provincial assembly seats in Sindh. It also secured 1.8 million votes in the Punjab Assembly, compared to PPP's 1.7 million.³⁵

Four months after the PTI win, by-elections in 12 constituencies for the National Assembly were held, as well as for 24 provincial assembly seats, of which 11 are in Punjab. Most of them were seats vacated by candidates who had won more than one seat during the general election. The results injected a ray of hope for the PMLN. The PMLN and PTI each won four national assembly seats, the Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN-Q) won two and the MMA, one. Out of the 24 provincial assembly seats, the PTI won 11 and the PMLN, seven. What was interesting was the PMLN winning six of those seats in Punjab, while the PTI won five.³⁶ The fact that it lost Punjab to the PTI in the national elections was seen as a death knell for the party, given the additional fact that its top leadership face an uncertain future. The results of the by-elections have been a morale booster for the PMLN as they begin to form the opposition in Punjab.

As the Imran Khan government logs in six months in power, its loss in the by-election denied it the opportunity to increase its majority in the national assembly. While the PMLN and PPP are sure to keep their guns trained on the

government, other parties such as the TLP have proved themselves as serious contenders. The TLP finished second in the Chakwal by-election, winning 32,326 votes in a seat won by the PMLN.³⁷ Its debut in electoral politics have proved that they have a large vote bank across the country, particularly Punjab, that would allow it bargaining power. Its defence of the country's draconian blasphemy law seems to be their group's single-point agenda, along with terrorising the country's religious minorities.³⁸ As the military's poster boy, Imran Khan may be still riding the high of being elected prime minister, but he may soon find that uneasy lies the head that wears the crown. The fact that he depends on independents to gain a majority will make his survival subject to manipulation by the deep state. [ORF](#)

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