

Pakistan military faces growing anger but still calls the shots

The support for Imran Khan is telling but the lack of a clear victor in elections places the military in an influential position.

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The Feb 8 elections in Pakistan resulted in a fractured mandate, leaving political uncertainty and protests in its wake.

Thousands have taken to the streets in various parts of Pakistan in response to the call issued by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which is led by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan, and a number of other political parties to protest against what they describe as “rigged elections”. Meanwhile, political parties are engaged in protracted attempts at building alliances and cobbling together a government with a slim majority.

No political party managed to win enough seats to form a government at the national level. PTI-affiliated candidates running as independents – because they were not allowed to contest under the party’s political symbol – garnered the largest number of votes and won 93 seats. Meanwhile, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) led by three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif won 75 seats. With 54 seats, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), whose leader is Mr Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of slain premier Benazir Bhutto, was placed third. None of the parties crossed the threshold of 134 seats needed to form a majority

government.

The fact that PTI-backed independents won despite being subjected to severe restrictions indicates that a sizeable section of the electorate is disillusioned with older political parties like the PML-N and PPP. In particular, the strong performance of the PTI can be attributed to the middle class and youth vote.

Khan’s message of fighting corruption and blaming political dynasts for the ills of the country, coupled with his use of religious symbolism, has appealed to this group of voters. Moreover, his and the PTI’s extensive use of social media has enabled them to reach out to younger Pakistanis.

Overall, this election indicates that the middle class and younger voters have emerged as a political force that is reshaping the traditional political arithmetic. Significantly, while the elites and middle class in regions like Punjab have long supported the military, the showdown between Khan and the military, which culminated in his ouster from power and detention, resulted in a large segment within these groups protesting against the military’s involvement in the political sphere. Thus, the results of the elections and the ongoing protest should in part be seen as a response against the military’s role in politics.

The incoming government is likely to be constrained by



Supporters of Imran Khan’s party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), staging a protest in Karachi on Feb 17. It is an open secret that the PML-N was the military’s preferred party in the latest elections, says the writer. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

constant negotiations with its coalition members. Political calculations will also come into play. For example, while the PPP has indicated that it is willing to be a part of a coalition headed by the PML-N, it has stated that it will not take up ministerial positions. This is a strategic move by the PPP to be in power without being seen to be responsible for the tough economic decisions that the future government will need to make.

For instance, the new government will have to negotiate a new International Monetary Fund loan package, as the current tranche expires in March 2024. For this, the IMF may demand austerity measures, such as

scrapping subsidies on fuel, and higher taxes for which the PPP does not want to take the heat.

Despite the differences between the PML-N and the PPP, they are likely to form the government with the backing of the military. While a large number of Pakistanis may have voted for PTI-backed candidates as a sign of opposition against the military’s involvement in the political sphere, the lack of a clear victor actually places the military in an influential position.

During Khan’s tenure as prime minister, Pakistan witnessed what is described as the “hybrid regime”, one in which the prime minister and chief of army staff (COAS) Qamar Javed Bajwa openly acknowledged that they

worked together. Developments in the lead-up to the elections, and since, indicate that the military’s new COAS, General Asim Munir, is likely to continue playing an important role in shaping and sustaining the coalition government.

As election results trickled in and accusations of vote rigging arose, Gen Munir called on politicians to display political responsibility and reminded them that “the nation needs stable hands and... to move on from the politics of anarchy”.

This could be read as a warning to the PTI to ensure that its supporters do not repeat the violent protests of May 9, 2023, that were triggered by Khan’s arrest. At the same time, it resonated with statements that had been made by past military leaders who had accused politicians of jeopardising the future of Pakistan and used this as a pretext to justify their political intervention.

With a weak coalition government, it is clear that the military’s role in shaping Pakistan’s approach to national security issues and foreign policy will remain unchallenged. For example, it is the military, and not the incoming government, that is likely to have the final say on the nature of Pakistan’s relationship with its neighbours such as India and Afghanistan.

Looking ahead, Pakistan will witness protests and intense political negotiations at least till Feb 29, the date by which elected members of the national assembly have to be sworn in. The decisions made by the political

parties and the military could shape Pakistan’s future.

It is an open secret that the PML-N was the military’s preferred party in this election. The military is also likely to back the party in the near future and play a role in sustaining the agreement between the PML-N and the PPP. Tellingly, Mr Nawaz Sharif has nominated his brother Shehbaz Sharif, who enjoys strong relations with the military establishment, as the party’s prime ministerial candidate.

However, such a coalition will struggle for legitimacy. It will continue to be dogged by allegations of vote rigging, and the election results also show that many Pakistanis are willing to openly oppose its benefactor, the military.

On its part, the PTI will have to decide how far it is willing to go in opposing the results of the elections. While it has called on its supporters to protest, it must be aware that large-scale violence would provide the military with a reason to intervene directly.

Furthermore, Khan and the PTI will be aware that if they hold on to their political base, they may well position themselves to be revived as a political ally of the establishment in the future. After all, there are no natural allies and permanent enemies in the current political landscape. Mr Nawaz Sharif had himself been ousted from power and forced into exile by a former military chief.

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