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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. A 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). The NA reserves 60 seats for women and 10 seats for religious minorities on a proportional basis, meaning only 272 districts elect representatives. The prime minister is elected to an indeterminate term by the NA. The president is elected to a five-year term by an Electoral College comprised of both chambers of Parliament, as well as members of each 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.

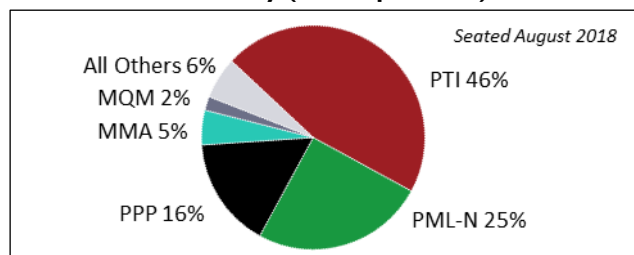
Historically, constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy have fared poorly in Pakistan, marked by tripartite power struggles among presidents, prime ministers, and army chiefs. The country has endured direct military rule for 33 of its 75 years of independence—most recently from 1999 to 2008—interspersed 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 General Ayub Khan in 1958, General Zia ul-Haq in 1977, and General 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 by the army 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 lives in self-imposed exile.

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 and consecutive 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 assembly while retaining its majority in KP. 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.

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 covertly manipulated the country's domestic politics before and during the election with a central motive of (again) removing Sharif's party from power and otherwise weakening it. A purported "military-judiciary nexus" allegedly came to favor Khan's PTI. Election observers and human rights groups issued statements pointing to sometimes "severe" abuses of democratic norms, and some candidates came from parties with links to banned Islamist terrorist groups (Islamist parties won a combined 10% of the national vote in 2018).

2022 Political Upheaval and New Government

In March 2022, less than four years after PM Khan had been seated, opposition parties in the NA moved a no-confidence motion against him, accusing him of poor governance and economic mismanagement. This sparked a month-long crisis that resulted in Khan's removal from office in April and the seating of a new government under PML-N leader Shehbaz Sharif. Khan, having reportedly lost the support of Pakistan's powerful military, vigorously opposed the no-confidence effort, ultimately asking the president to dissolve the NA (before it could vote), while calling opposition and defecting PTI members "traitors" and claiming without evidence that the U.S. government had conspired to unseat him. Pakistan's Supreme Court ruled that Khan's actions were illegal, thus restoring the NA and allowing a vote on the motion. A majority of PTI members boycotted the vote—which passed with 174 votes, two more than required—and resigned their seats. Khan continues to press for early new elections, which the sitting government rejects. Under the Constitution, national elections must be held no later than October 2023.

Background: Zardari/PPP Era, 2008-2013

After nine years of direct military rule under General Musharraf and just weeks after Benazir Bhutto's 2008 murder, her dynastic Pakistan People's Party (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. 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 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, which surged into prominence after 2011. The PML-N's mandate was a Punjabi one—90% of its seats came from that province. Nawaz's third term as PM ended abruptly 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 his term's final 10 months.

Background: Khan/PTI Era, 2018-2022

Prime Minister 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

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the younger brother of former PM Nawaz Sharif, served as Punjab Chief Minister for 10 years before becoming PML-N leader (and NA Opposition Leader) in 2018 after his brother's expulsion from politics. Generally seen as an effective administrator, Sharif took office in April 2022.

Foreign Affairs Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the PPP Chairman since 2007, first won an NA seat in Sindh in 2018. The 34-year-old dynastic scion became Pakistan's youngest-ever foreign minister in April 2022.

Defense Minister Khawaja Muhammed Asif, a Punjabi PML-N stalwart, was defense minister and then foreign minister from 2013-2018, taking office again in April 2022.

Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah was a longtime Punjab provincial minister before winning an NA seat in 2018 and taking the interior portfolio in April 2022.

Finance Minister Mifta Ismail, a U.S.-educated political economist from Karachi, joined the PML-N in 2011 and held the finance portfolio briefly in 2018 before returning to the position in April 2022.

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 (the ISI) 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 his 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. In 2013, Khan, a former cricket superstar, saw his party win a majority of provincial assembly seats in the Pashtun-majority KP province, where it has seen a mixed governance record. Khan has been a vocal critic of the United States and is viewed by some as sympathetic toward Islamist militants. Until April 2022, the PTI held 155 NA seats—almost half of them from the Punjab heartland—won nearly 32% of the 2018 vote nationally, and led a national ruling coalition. PTI continues to oversee the KP province (under Chief Minister Mahmood Khan), and, after surprise July 2022 by-election wins, now controls the Punjab provincial government under Chief Minister Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was established in 1993 by then-Prime Minister 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, and it led the national opposition alliance until Khan's April 2022 removal.

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 continues to run the provincial government under Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah. 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, since April 2022, is 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, ideologically similar to the Afghan Taliban and with links to Pakistani militant groups. Rehman is able to 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.

Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) is a regional party established by descendants of pre-partition immigrants (Muhajirs) from what is now India. Secular and focused on provincial issues, its core support is mainly in Karachi and other Sindhi urban centers. The MQM won 7 NA seats with about 1.4% of the 2018 vote, and had been part of the PTI-led ruling coalition until its April 2022 defection.

Sources: Government of Pakistan agencies; party websites

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