

# Pakistan's 2024 National Election

March 21, 2024

## Overview

Congress has taken interest in Pakistan's democratization, viewing progress as important to U.S. interests including security cooperation and economic stability. In the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.Res. 901—expressing support for democracy and human rights in Pakistan—has garnered 101 bipartisan cosponsors to date.

Elections to seat Pakistan's National Assembly (NA) and four provincial assemblies to five-year terms took place on February 8, 2024, after nearly three months' [delay](#) and two years of political turmoil. Pakistanis' discontent was on display in the run-up to the election, including in [pre-election violence](#). A record-high seven in ten told [pollsters](#) economic conditions were worsening, and the same number expressed a lack of confidence in election credibility. Voter [turnout](#) was under 48% among the 128 million registered voters, a [decline](#) from above 52% in the 2018 elections.

More than 5,100 NA candidates (94% of them male) and 167 registered political parties [participated](#) in the February 2024 elections. The contest to fill 266 contested NA seats (70 are reserved for women and minorities) pitted the Pakistan Muslim League faction of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (PML-N), and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) under Bilawal Bhutto Zardari—son of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and former President Asif Ali Zardari—against independent candidates affiliated with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI or Movement for Justice) party founded by former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Khan, elected prime minister in 2018, was [removed](#) from office by an April 2022 NA no-confidence vote and later jailed on corruption charges and barred from holding office. His still-[popular](#) party was largely dismantled, leaving its candidates to run as “PTI-supported” independents.

PTI's independents won at least 93 seats—a plurality—[shocking](#) observers, who called the outcome a “[political miracle](#)” and a “[bloody nose](#)” for Pakistan's “establishment” (a euphemism for the military and intelligence services). Without allies, however, they could not form a government. The PML-N (75 seats) and PPP (54 seats) cobbled together smaller parties (and some independents) to form a [coalition government](#) under Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz's younger brother, who was sworn in as Pakistan's prime minister on March 3.

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## Background

The PTI in late 2021 fell [out of favor](#) with the military, the institution that reportedly [enabled](#) the party's earlier electoral success. Khan's government was replaced by a [new coalition](#) in April 2022 comprised mainly of the PML-N and PPP; Shehbaz Sharif [served](#) as prime minister until August 2023, when a caretaker government was formed to oversee elections.

Khan denounced his 2022 removal, blaming it (without providing evidence) on alleged machinations by the [U.S. government](#) and/or [Pakistan Army leadership](#). His public criticisms of the army were unprecedented, leaving army leadership "aghast" and [polarizing](#) the electorate. The PML-N-led government began [cracking down](#) on Khan and his party, including through [media bans](#) and [criminal charges](#) against Khan himself.

In May 2023, Khan was arrested on corruption charges, sparking [pro-PTI protests](#) across Pakistan; some of these were lethal and included attacks on [military facilities](#). The government [called](#) in the army in to restore order and analysts [described](#) the establishment as intent on [crushing](#) the Khan-PTI movement and coopting the civilian government to consolidate a "[hybrid regime](#)" in which the army is above criticism. In August, Khan was [sentenced](#) to three years in prison on graft charges and [banned](#) from politics for five years. PTI's electoral symbol, a cricket bat, was [banned](#) (two-fifths of Pakistanis are illiterate). In the week before the election, the military reportedly [intensified](#) efforts to influence the outcome; Khan was [given](#) multiple prison sentences in three separate cases. Government officials [denied](#) illicit interference of any kind.

## Critical Commentary

Observers have [called](#) the 2024 elections among the [least credible](#) in the country's history. According to the nongovernmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the most serious victims of "[political engineering](#)" were the country's [democracy](#), electoral politics, and the rule of law. Khan and his party [claimed](#) they won as many as 180 seats. One senior official reportedly [confessed](#) to manipulating the outcome.

One day after the election, the U.S. State Department [joined](#) "credible international and local election observers in their assessment that these elections included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly," and condemned "electoral violence, restrictions on the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms." The [United Nations](#), [European Union](#), and [United Kingdom](#) expressed similar concerns.

In late February, 31 Representatives signed a [letter](#) to President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressing concerns about alleged election rigging and urging the Administration to withhold recognition of Pakistan's new government until a credible investigation has been conducted.

## Implications for U.S. Interests

Analysts say Pakistan's new government is [fragile](#) and lacks [legitimacy](#), and express [concern](#) its [weakness](#) will make it more [difficult](#) to [address](#) political, economic, and security crises. The government's standing may depend on the perceived credibility of ongoing [investigations](#) into vote-rigging complaints.

The election outcome appeared to reflect public [discontent](#) with the establishment and the recent performance of the civilian government. Public perceptions among Pakistanis of security institutions able to shape political outcomes and impose stability, whether held favorably or not, are badly [damaged](#). Imran Khan and his supporters are likely to continue [roiling](#) the country's politics in opposition. The military

retains considerable influence; one expert [predicts](#) the coalition “will function as a junior partner to the military.”

The Biden Administration [declared](#) that “democratic principles and respect for the rule of law are central to the U.S.-Pakistan relationship and these values will continue to guide this partnership forward.” At the same time, a State Department spokesperson [suggested](#) U.S. engagement with Islamabad (including cooperation on counterterrorism and regional security, and support for economic reforms) may remain unchanged.

Observers do not anticipate major changes in Pakistan’s foreign relations. Prime Minister Sharif, who a Pakistani diplomat [called](#) an “old friend of China,” is [likely](#) to have better relations with Pakistan’s military than Nawaz. China’s foreign ministry [congratulated](#) Pakistan for elections “held in a generally steady and smooth manner.” Some analysts [consider](#) the Sharifs more amenable to dialogue with India than other political leaders, but Islamabad’s domestic crises [temper](#) hopes for Pakistan-India rapprochement.

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