

## Pakistan: A New Beginning?

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Although opposition leader Nawaz Sharif was favored going into Pakistan's fraught parliamentary elections on Saturday, nobody predicted that his party would win so convincingly. The weeks leading up to the vote were marred by the worst election violence in the country's history, combined with widespread fear that a divided electorate would fail to produce a government with sufficient clout to deal with [growing intolerance](#), multiple insurgencies, and an imploding economy. But the strong victory by Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) amid high voter turnout now holds the promise of greater stability—and with it the possibility that a civilian government might at last be equipped to tackle some of these challenges.

The task will not be easy. In the four weeks leading up to the vote, the Taliban and other groups killed more than 150 people and injured some 400. On May 3, the country's top prosecutor was gunned down in his car in Islamabad, the capital, in broad daylight. The son of former Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gailani was kidnapped two days before the elections. And on election day itself, bomb explosions, suicide attacks, and assassinations claimed the lives of 38 people and left another 150 wounded.

The Pakistani Taliban—who are separate from the Afghan Taliban—had vowed to force the government to cancel the elections, which they consider un-Islamic, and had targeted the country's secular and liberal parties in particular. But the stunning turnout—60 percent of eligible voters compared to just 43 percent in the last election—showed that many Pakistanis refused to be cowed by the violence and clearly wanted their voices heard.

While a final tally was still pending Monday, Sharif's party is likely to get around 130 of the 137 seats needed to form a government. The swing in his favor means he does not have to form a coalition with his main rivals—the Justice Party (officially the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf, or PTI), led by former cricketer Imran Khan, and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), led by President Asif Ali Zardari, who has run the government for the past five years. Instead, Sharif can form a coalition government with smaller regional parties and independents, who will be less prone to blackmailing him for ministries and rewards.

Both Imran Khan's PTI and Zardari's PPP fared badly in the elections, receiving just over thirty seats each. This outcome was unsurprising for the Pakistan People's Party, whose support in many of its key constituencies had been eroded by the abysmal performance of the Zardari government. The PPP suffered because of its incompetence, corruption, and failure at governance, and almost all its ministers from the previous government lost their seats.

But there is enormous disappointment among the supporters of Imran Khan—a relative upstart with a [large following](#) among younger urban voters. While many had hoped that Khan's call to change the power structure of the country would bring in a tsunami of votes, his candidacy may have been weakened by his earlier derogatory comments about women and religious minorities and his words of praise for the Taliban. In part, those comments reflect the country's ongoing identity crisis, in which extreme Islamic ideas—generated in middle-class drawing rooms and the poorest areas alike—are coming into direct conflict with the secular, liberal values most Pakistanis have held for the past sixty years. But the comments helped confuse his potential voting base. Clearly many voters felt unsafe in Khan's hands and instead decided to back a more experienced party that has been in power before.

Sharif's most urgent task will be to reconcile with the army leadership, from which he has been estranged since 1999, when the army led a coup against the government he led at the time. Only by working together can the two powers hope to give the country a modicum of peace by dealing with the Taliban movement, ending sectarian killings, and improving relations with Afghanistan, India, and the US.

The Taliban now control wide swathes of northwestern Pakistan, which is largely inhabited by Pashtuns—the same ethnic group that lives in Afghanistan and from whom the Taliban on both sides of the border have emerged. Peshawar, the capital of the province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), is virtually under siege; the army is fighting the Taliban in a valley just a few miles from the city. Imran Khan has won a majority of seats in the KP provincial assembly, which means his party will now govern the province. That will put to the test his election promises of ending the Taliban insurgency in the province and forcing the US to end its drone campaign in KP. However, many Pakistanis fear that Khan's policies will mean surrendering to the Taliban's extreme demands for Islamic law rather than standing up to them. Khan's capture of KP is also certain to worry the US government, which views Khan as a Taliban sympathizer. When US troops withdraw from Afghanistan next year, they will need to use a road that traverses KP province to reach the port of Karachi, so the cooperation of the KP provincial government will be critical.

Nor are the Taliban the only militant organization opposing the government. In Balochistan province, militant Baloch separatists, who want to declare the province's independence from Pakistan, tried to halt the election by attacking Baloch politicians who were taking part. On May 12, the day after the election, militants launched rocket attacks on Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, as well as a suicide car bomb on the convey of Balochistan's police chief, attacks which left at least six dead and some seventy people wounded (the police chief escaped harm). In Karachi, a diverse city of 20 million people and the country's business hub, there is a continuing multi-pronged civil war involving the Taliban, Baloch separatists, and other warring ethnic groups and mafia gangs.

Minorities all over the country continue to feel threatened, and the new government will have to do much more to reassure them. Dozens of Shias have been gunned down in Balochistan by a Punjab-based sectarian party that many Shias suspect is allied with Sharif. Meanwhile many members of other groups, such as the country's small Christian community, voted for Sharif's party, abandoning their traditional support for the PPP, which has failed to protect them under the Zardari government. Sharif does not have a history of standing up for minorities, but given the growing number of violent attacks on them by Islamic extremists, he will have to develop a more proactive approach.

Meanwhile, Sharif will need to deal with Pakistan's traditional antagonist, India, and forge a new Afghan policy. During his two premierships in the 1990s, Sharif made genuine efforts at peace with India but was thwarted by an aggressive and uncompromising army. Circumstances may be more favorable this time. Just hours after Sharif's election on Saturday, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invited Sharif to visit India. Moreover, the army—faced with a severe weakening of the state—now seems more amenable to improving relations with New Delhi. The army leadership is also keen to end the war in Afghanistan by persuading leaders of the Afghan Taliban now living in Pakistan to talk to the Kabul government and the US. Sharif has said he wants to promote the peace process in Afghanistan.

Above all, many Pakistanis want Sharif to concentrate on the economy, to improve the energy supply and create jobs. The economy is teetering on the edge, as the country is close to defaulting on its foreign loans. At the moment, it has state-held foreign reserves of about US \$6 billion, or about six weeks worth of imports. In many parts of the country, there is no electricity for up to sixteen hours a day and diminishing gas supplies, which has led to industry shut-downs and soaring unemployment among young people.

Like most Pakistani parties in recent years, Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League has voiced anger at Washington, in particular over the use of drone missiles. Now that the PML is in power, Sharif will have to deal with the Americans more adroitly, particularly if he wants their support to gain the huge loans from the IMF and the World Bank that Pakistan desperately needs. If the army and the new government are able to seize this opportunity, Pakistan could finally begin to emerge from the chaos, lawlessness, and terrorism that has gripped the country for much of the past decade.