

Pakistan's politicians must unite to save the nation

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Ahmed Rashid in Lahore.

[Pakistan's parliamentary elections](#) on May 11 are set to become the bloodiest ever as the Taliban and other groups declare open war against democracy - targeting three mainstream secular parties in particular - and the army. Whatever the circumstances may be on voting day, and a low turn out is almost certain, people are still hopeful that the elections will usher in a more responsible and competent government compared to the previous one, led by the Pakistan Peoples party.

Even by Pakistan's dismal standards of rigged elections, military dictatorships and incompetent civilian governments, the polarisation, murder and mayhem on the streets is unprecedented. Coupled with the gross opportunism of all political leaders in ignoring issues on which the nation's survival depends, this is causing immense international and public concern.

The future after the elections will continue to look bleak unless the politicians can agree to work together on these crucial issues. The first is improving security and a finding common approach to counterterrorism. The Pakistani Taliban have designated three parties, including the PPP, as secular, liberal and, therefore, liable for elimination. (Also being targeted is the Pashtun nationalist and democratic Awami National party, which has ruled the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.)

In April alone, 100 candidates and their supporters have been killed, and 300 have been wounded in suicide bombings, shootings and land mine explosions - the majority from the ANP. Yet the two rightwing parties that have been let off the hook by the Taliban, led by opposition leaders Nawaz Sharif and the former cricketer Imran Khan, have refused to condemn the militants or take a stand on behalf of their targeted colleagues. Mr Khan appears to be sympathetic to the Taliban, while Mr Sharif pretends they do not exist.

This has created a worsening division as one set of politicians are gunned down and others campaign freely. Moreover, there is also a deep territorial division. The Taliban and Punjabi extremist groups have left alone the most populous Pakistani province of [Punjab](#), ruled by Mr Sharif's party, where there is barely any violence. In the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Sind, where there is widespread distrust of Punjab and its politicians, there is rampant violence. Unless all parties unite against terrorism now, the Taliban will continue to gain ground even after the elections and will probably start targeting Mr Sharif and Mr Khan's parties as well. The militants have pledged to continue killing after the poll and to prevent the new parliament from meeting.

The second pressing issue is the economy. The fact that between now and the formation of the next government (unlikely before June or July) Pakistan may slide into bankruptcy is being ignored by all the parties. With reserves of just \$6bn, few incomings and heavy outgoings (largely to pay back an International Monetary Fund loan), Pakistan could default on its debt. No party has a clear economic agenda for dealing with the immediate crisis or the long-term economic mess in which there is barely any money, electricity, gas or petrol to keep the economy from shrinking further.

All the parties are opportunistically launching tirades against the west, Nato and the US to gain popularity, when their leaders know perfectly well that whipping up such a storm can only play further into the hands of the Taliban extremists, riling up an already angry population and becoming a liability when the next elected leaders ask western institutions asking for loans and a bailout that is unlikely to be forthcoming.

The parties are also fueling further ethnic separatism, both secular and religious, to gain political allies in the three less populous provinces. Mainstream parties are pandering to candidates in these provinces expressing extreme forms of nationalism or separatism, endangering the future of the federation. The Taliban wants a separate Islamic state; some Baloch militant separatists who have boycotted the polls have killed Balochi

candidates.

Another issue conveniently ignored is how Pakistan's foreign policy and civil-military relations will evolve after the elections. The army has run foreign policy in the critical areas of relations with India, Afghanistan and the US - all of which are going through profound tensions and change as the US prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan. None of the politicians has indicated how their relations with the army will develop or whether they will seek a seat at the table of foreign policy decision making.

This election is being hailed as the [first transfer of power from one elected government to another in Pakistan's history](#). But at such a critical moment, when the army has clearly indicated it is supporting democracy, the nation's lacklustre politicians are failing to turn their perennial parochial concerns into long-term plans that can save the country from the abyss.

In the next few weeks, the dangers are immense but so are the opportunities. The crisis can be met only if all political parties - victors and vanquished - and the army understand the need to pull the ship of state together and change its direction. Unless that happens the next government, just like the last one, will be doomed to failure.