

PAKISTAN 2018: GENERAL ELECTIONS AND THE GOVERNMENT
OF IMRAN KHAN

Marco Corsi

Asia Maior – An Italian think tank on Asia
macorsi@gmail.com

In 2018, for the third time in Pakistan's 70 year-long history, a parliament completed its five-year term. For the second time in a row, a transfer of power between elected civilian governments eventuated. For the first time since the establishment of the political party in 1988, a PML-N (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) administration completed its term in the federal government.

Pakistan approached the general elections in an uncertain political climate. According to the pre-election surveys, the two strongest contenders, the PML-N and the PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, «Pakistan Movement for Justice»), were sharing the electorate. Overall, the PML-N seemed to be better placed to win the elections despite being weakened by the judicial investigations which first ousted Nawaz Sharif from politics and later led him to jail. Desertions by long-time loyalists and pressure from the judiciary led the party's supporters to raise the prospect of intentional institutional interference and allege a military-judiciary plan to weaken the ruling party.

The PTI increased the number of its electoral supporters dramatically compared with the previous elections thanks also to the political opportunists who joined the party after the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif in 2017. Allegations of being backstopped by the military were widespread in the run-up to the elections, yet the PTI emerged victorious at the poll with a narrow majority (less than 32% of voters).

After having spent eight years on death row, Asia Bibi, a Christian woman arrested in 2009 on charges of blasphemy, was acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan for insufficient evidence. Asia's case showed the unreadiness of the new PTI government - like the previous ones - to challenge the blasphemy laws and to fight the discriminations against religious minorities in Pakistan.

In January 2018, in line with the new US policy on Pakistan, Donald Trump's administration announced that it would suspend part of the military assistance to Pakistan due to the ineffective support provided by the country in combating the militants being confronted by American troops in Afghanistan. The bilateral relations remained tense throughout the reporting period.

1. Introduction

In Pakistan, the general elections held in July 2018 were the premier event of the period under analysis (January-December 2018).

Upon completion of the tenure of the PML-N government on 31 May 2018, the parliament was dissolved, and the mandate of the prime minister

Shahid Khaqan Abbasi expired.¹ As prescribed by the constitution, the new caretaker government took over with the primary duty of overseeing the Election Commission in holding free and fair elections. Nasir-ul Mulk, the former Pakistani chief justice, was appointed as interim prime minister by the leader of the house in the National Assembly, prime minister Abbasi, and leader of the opposition, Khursheed Shah, and served in office until parliamentary elections were held on 25 July 2018.

The two main contender political groups were the PML-N and the PTI. The PML-N had dominated national politics since the 2013 elections.² Following Nawaz Sharif's disqualification as prime minister in July 2017, in October 2017 the PML-N succeeded in amending the Constitution by passing a law (Elections Act 2017) which had allowed him to continue to lead the party. Since the ousting of Mr. Sharif, the PML-N was foremost among those raising allegations of political motivations and military engineering behind his disqualification, as well as of a systematic attack on the party conducted by the judiciary. According to the results of a Gallup survey published by *The Wall Street Journal* in April 2018, the PML-N was still the most popular party in Pakistan, primarily due to its stronghold in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, followed by the PTI and the PPP (Pakistan Peoples Party).³

The PPP, who had not recovered from the significant political defeat in 2013,⁴ approached the elections with an almost irrelevant political role and with little chance of winning. The PPP ruled the country from 2008 to 2013 with Ali Asif Zardari – Benazir Bhutto's widower – serving as president of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of Benazir and Zardari, was elected the PPP's chairman in 2007. Asif Zardari's numerous corruption and murder allegations, for which he had spent a total of 11 years in jail, jeopardised the PPP's image.⁵ Since 2013, when the PML-N won the general election, the PPP has been the largest opposition party and has been governing in its stronghold province of Sindh; it has also been the majority party in the Senate. Asif Zardari's reputation and the PPP's young dynast leader Bilawal meant that the latter's first electoral campaign was mainly aimed at preserving the political relevance of the party.⁶

Portraying a transparent, democratic system and an inclusive economic vision, Imran Khan's PTI tapped the votes of the young, urban,

1. 'As Pakistan Election Nears, Caretaker Prime Minister Is Named', *The New York Times*, 28 May 2018.

2. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan: Il terzo governo di Nawaz Sharif', *Asia Maior* 2013, passim.

3. 'Trial of Ex-Leader Rattles Pakistan's Democracy', *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 April 2018; 'Surveys predict close-run between the PTI, and the PML-N in 2018 elections', *Pakistan Today*, 5 July 2018.

4. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan: il terzo governo di Nawaz Sharif', p. 89.

5. Encyclopaedia Britannica (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Asif-Ali-Zardari>).

6. 'PPP may ally with PTI to regain power', *News International*, 6 June 2018.

middle-class electorate,⁷ attracted by the leader's anti-corruption campaign and commitment to introducing a «new wave» in Pakistan to crack down on corruption and family dynasties. Khan tapped the votes of women and religious minorities, too, as well as those of marginalised demographic groups.⁸ Khan's populism led the PTI to be seen as the only chance of bringing about a change in Pakistan.

2. *The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz*

Following his disqualification, Sharif led a campaign against the judicial verdict and its supporters – «anti-democratic», as he described it – that portrayed him as a victim of judicial activism and increased PML-N's popularity. PML-N's followers have seen Sharif's 2017 disqualification as a judicial coup engineered by sections of Pakistan's military and intelligence services to contrast with the overall good performance of Nawaz's government.⁹

Overall, the PML-N government's performance in the period 2013 – 2018 is debatable and, according to many commentators, the executive at the time failed to deliver on many of its commitments.¹⁰ During the five years of its administration, the economy grew, yet with structural weaknesses and a mounting debt burden.¹¹ The PML-N administration avoided borrowing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but continued borrowing from other sources with a higher interest rate.¹² Borrowings and loans were almost doubled up to more than US\$ 42 billion, increasing Pakistan's public debt and foreign exchange liabilities to US\$ 91.8 billion (US\$ 53.4 million in 2013) as of March 2018.¹³ Mainly due to the external debt servicing, for-

7. Almost one-third of registered voters in the country belongs to the age group of 18-30 years (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *Population by 5 years age groups*).

8. 'The Political Hurdles for Imran Khan's Government', *The Diplomat*, 3 August 2018.

9. According to his supporters, Sharif's government had tried to reduce tensions with India, and triggered a remarkable economic growth, as acknowledged by international finance institutions and influential international rating agencies. The government brought about the fall of the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) agreement and its economic benefits under Nawaz's tenure. Militancy was gradually contained in the years of his premiership. 'Democratic Revolution', *The Diplomat*, 21 June 2018.

10. 'Opinion: Five years in power - PML-N largely delivered on promises', *The Express Tribune*, 4 June 2018.

11. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', *Asia Maior 2017*, pp. 351-368.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

13. US\$ 9.6 billion was borrowed from other external sources during the fiscal year 2018, of which US\$ 1.6 billion was in April. 'Govt borrowed \$9.6 billion in 10 months', *The Nation*, 29 May 2018.

eign reserves fell, confirming the last year's trend and steady decline.¹⁴ As of the end of November 2018, the national forex reserves were about US\$ 14 million.¹⁵ Growing imports (+21% from 2013) and lowering exports (-12% since 2013) triggered a trade deficit that increased from US\$ 19.2 billion in 2012 to US\$ 35.6 billion in 2017, and an account deficit from US\$ 2.5 billion in the fiscal year 2013 to US\$ 18.9 billion in the fiscal year 2018.¹⁶

According to a report by the Policy Research Institute of Market Economy, the PML-N government did not achieve notable improvements in the taxation system either.¹⁷ While tax collection has improved in absolute terms as a result of the increased size of the economy, taxation reforms were not undertaken by the administration of Nawaz Sharif. The PML-N executive also did not intervene in the long-standing issue of state-owned enterprises, which employ over 400,000 people and have a profit margin of just 1.25%. The privatisation of loss-making institutions (Pakistan Steel Mills, Pakistan International Airlines, Pakistan Railways, and others) was also not addressed.¹⁸ Finally, the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), however significant an achievement, was driven more by China than by Pakistan.¹⁹

Although hit by judiciary sentences,²⁰ the PML-N won the by-election held in September 2017 in Pakistan's second-largest city, Lahore, in the country's most populous province of Punjab, where it continued to enjoy significant support.²¹ Sharif's wife, Kulsoom Nawaz, won the by-election with a 14,000 vote margin against the PTI candidate and with 49.3 % of the vote against the 61% gained by the PML-N in 2013. The PTI candidate took 37.6% of the vote, up from 35% in the previous poll. The campaign was run by Sharif's daughter, Maryam Nawaz, also involved in the Panama

14. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', p. 360; State Bank of Pakistan, Domestic Markets & Monetary Management Department, *Liquid Foreign Exchange Reserves*.

15. State Bank of Pakistan, *Foreign Reserves* (<http://www.sbp.org.pk/ecodata/forex.pdf>); 'Rising current account deficit: An outcome of following bad policies', *Pakistan and Gulf Economist*, 4 June 2018.

16. 'PML-N's performance review contrary to claims', *Pakistan Today Profit*, 30 May 2018; 'The PML-N's economy: Part II', *The News International*, 6 June 2018; 'Pakistan ranked 8th in size of trade deficit', *The Express Tribune*, 29 October 2018.

17. Policy Research Institute of Market Economy (PRIME), *PML-N Economic Agenda: between Promises and Performance*, Islamabad 2018.

18. 'PML-N's performance review contrary to claims', *Pakistan Today Profit*, 30 May 2018.

19. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', pp. 360-362.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 353-356.

21. 'Pakistan's By-Election Reveals Undercurrents Impacting 2018 Elections', *VOA News*, 18 September 2017.

Papers scandal,²² while Nawaz and her wife were in London for Kulsoom's health-related treatments.

In February 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that Sharif did not qualify to serve as president of the PML-N. According to the decision by the three-member bench, a person disqualified under Articles 62 and 63 of the Constitution cannot head a political party. The chief justice, Saqib Nisar, ruled that all the decisions that were taken by Nawaz Sharif since his disqualification, all the orders passed, and documents issued, were null and void.²³ The court's ruling nullified all the tickets given out by Mr. Sharif to PML-N candidates for Senate elections. Following the verdict, the PML-N leadership decided to appoint Shehbaz Sharif, three times chief minister of Punjab to May 2018, as the party president, and he was elected on 13 March 2018.²⁴

On 3 March 2018, the triennial Senate elections in Pakistan were held to replace 52 retiring senators out of 103 (46 seats filled by the four provincial assemblies, two by the National Assembly and four by representatives of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, FATA). Out of the 135 candidates running for Senate elections, 20 were from the PPP, 14 from the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM, the dominant political force in Karachi), and 13 from the PTI. A further 65 independent candidates also contested the elections, including 23 nominated by the PML-N and later barred on their party ticket in the wake of a ruling issued by the Supreme Court. The PML-N emerged as the largest party in the upper house of parliament, followed by the PPP and the PTI. Fifteen of the PML-N nominees, who stood as independent candidates in the aftermath of the Supreme Court ruling in the Elections Act 2017, stood victorious, raising the total party strength from 18 to 33 seats. The PPP and the PTI secured twelve and six seats respectively, rising to 20 and 12 the number of their members in the upper house.²⁵

22. The Panama Papers scandal, or «Panamagate», originated in 2016 from a leak of files from a Panama-based provider of offshore services, Mossack Fonseca. Mr. Sharif's name doesn't appear in the Panama Papers, but three of his six children – Maryam, Hasan and Hussain – were found having purchased luxury properties in London using controlled offshore shell companies. The Supreme Court appointed a five-member bench and ordered an investigation into the allegations. The appointed team reached the conclusion that Sharif family's wealth was far above its members' earnings and that Nawaz had not declared part of his income and hid assets. In July 2017, the Supreme Court of Pakistan voted unanimously to disqualify Nawaz Sharif from holding public offices. His case was then referred to the anti-corruption authority – the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) – for further investigations.

23. 'Disqualified person can't head political party, SC rules against Nawaz Sharif', *The International News*, 21 February 2018.

24. 'CM pledges oath of allegiance to «our» Quaid: Shehbaz wears the crown', *Daily Times*, 14 March 2018; 'Shehbaz to be PML-N's candidate for PM's post', *The Daily Times*, 1 July 2018; 'PML-N to sweep 2018 elections: The Economist', *The Express Tribune*, 15 January 2018.

25. 'Stage set for Senate election today', *Daily Times*, 3 March 2018. 'PML-N takes Senate crown', *Daily Times*, 4 March 2018.

On 12 March 2018, elections were held to appoint the chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate. The two highest seats went to joint opposition candidates, respectively Sadiq Sanjrani (an independent senator from Beluchistan supported by the PPP, the PTI, and the MQM-Pakistan, who got 57 votes) and PPP's Saleem Mandviwalla, who secured 54 votes.

In April 2018, the five-member bench of the Supreme Court declared Nawaz Sharif disqualified for life, along with former members of the National Assembly, the PTI leader Jahangir Khan Tareen and others.²⁶ They were disqualified under Article 62-I(f) of the Constitution, which prescribes that a parliamentarian must be «honest and righteous». Based on the court's decision, a disqualified person cannot be a member of parliament or a public servant or contest elections. The sentence meant Nawaz Sharif's lifetime ban from the parliament, which appeared to be the end of his political career.²⁷ A court also disqualified the foreign minister, Khawaja Asif, for violating the country's election laws.

3. Military and judiciary interference

Allegations of military interference intensified in the run-up to the elections. A report prepared by an independent think-tank, the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), deemed the pre-poll process «unfair» in the year before the election.²⁸ PILDAT reported a «surreptitious muzzling» of the media, a rise in bias from the military establishment and «perceived partisanship in judicial and political accountability» that had «nearly eroded the prospects of a free and fair election in 2018».²⁹ Media reports were censored, with some newspapers and television channels complaining that their circulation and broadcasts were interrupted in the run-up to the elections. Journalists with sympathetic views toward the PML-N were reported as being threatened; PML-N lawmakers from Punjab province referred to menaces being done by unknown individuals, allegedly from intelligence services, asking them to ditch Sharif. Some of them then defected to the PTI. International press reported an intimidation campaign launched by the military establishment against its critics.³⁰

26. 'Disqualified for life: Curtain falls on political careers of Sharif, Tareen', *The Express Tribune*, 13 April 2018.

27. 'Sharif's Lifetime Ban from Politics. Is the Final Blow to Pakistan's Democracy', *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2018.

28. PILDAT, *General Election 2018. Score Card on Perception of Pre-Poll Fairness, The Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency*, Islamabad May 2018; 'Election to Test Pakistan Democracy Amid Allegations of Military Meddling', *Reuters*, 1 June 2018.

29. *Ibid.*

30. 'In Pre-election Pakistan, a Military Crackdown Is the Real Issue', *The New York Times*, 6 June 2018; 'Pakistan's Bittersweet Election Season', *The Diplomat*, 3 July 2018.

Some PML-N candidates were disqualified ahead of the 2018 elections. The former privatisation minister, Daniyal Aziz, was considered ineligible by the Supreme Court for contempt of court due to his comments on Sharif's removal. At the end of June 2018, the former prime minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, was also barred from contesting his home constituency of Murree by an election tribunal. In a verdict that raised prospects of military interference, later overturned by the decision of the High Court, Abbasi was found guilty of concealment of facts in election papers and was disqualified from politics for life.³¹ A few weeks later, another PML-N candidate, Hanif Abbasi, was convicted by a court, given a life term and was unable to contest the general elections.³²

Following the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif in the Panama Papers case on 28 July 2017, which marked his third incomplete prime ministerial term,³³ the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) filed three references against the Sharif family. The first was on the purchase of upscale London flats, the Avenfield apartments, owned by the Sharif family since 1993 and purchased using corruption money, according to the prosecutors. Two more cases involved the Al-Azizia Steel Mills, the Hill Metal Establishment and offshore companies, including Flagship Investment Limited, in which Sharif's family was accused of money laundering, tax evasion and hiding foreign assets. On 6 July 2018, the Anti-Graft Court in Islamabad announced the verdict relating to the apartments in Avenfield House.³⁴ The court sentenced Nawaz Sharif in absentia, him being in London with his daughter Maryam to tend to his hospitalised wife, to ten years in jail, with one for not cooperating with the court. Maryam was sentenced to seven years for abetment in the purchase of the London properties and one year for non-cooperation with the court. Her husband, Muhammad Safdar, was given one year in jail and taken into custody after the sentence. The Avenfield apartments in London, owned by the Sharif family since 1993, were then confiscated. According to the court, the «three times risen and fallen»

31. According to the verdict, Abbasi had made an error in his declaration of the value of his home in Islamabad. He was then initially disqualified on the basis of the same Article 62 of Pakistan's Constitution that was applied to oust Nawaz Sharif in July 2017. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', p. 354; 'Former Pakistan Prime Minister barred from re-election', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2018; 'Pakistan Court Lifts Ex-PM's Disqualification in Latest Election Twist', *Reuters*, 29 June 2018.

32. Abbasi was convicted for misusing 500 kg of the controlled chemical ephedrine he obtained for his company, Grey Pharmaceutical, in 2010. The court ruled that 363 kg could be accounted for and Abbasi had failed to provide evidence of the use of the remaining quantity. 'Court hands life sentence to PML-N's Hanif Abbasi in ephedrine quota case', *Dawn*, 21 July 2018.

33. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', p. 354.

34. 'Avenfield reference verdict: Nawaz gets 10 years, Maryam 7', *Daily Times*, 6 July 2018.

Nawaz Sharif³⁵ and his daughter had not disclosed the source of funds they used to purchase the flats, nor they had reported them to the tax authorities. The court also fined Nawaz eight million British pounds and Maryam two million British pounds. The verdict disqualified both Maryam, Nawaz's chosen political heir, and her husband from contesting Pakistan's general elections.³⁶ Nawaz's sons, Hasan and Hussain, who were involved in the case,³⁷ were declared absconded and not sentenced owing to their repeated absences.

Upon their arrival at Lahore's airport from London on 13 July 2018, Nawaz and Maryam were arrested and brought to Islamabad.³⁸ They were both provided with B class facility prison (refused by Maryam), which allows a superior mode of living, while the caretaker administration decided to hold the trial in the remaining two references. The two convicted exercised their right to appeal under Section 32 of the NAB Ordinance before two judges of the Islamabad High Court, which has the authority to suspend the sentences pending appeal and to overrule the verdicts.³⁹ On 19 September 2018, the Islamabad High Court suspended the sentences of Nawaz Sharif, his daughter Maryam and his son in law Safdar in the Avenfield corruption reference. A two-member bench accepted the petitions filed by the three convicts, who left the jail and were flown to Lahore.⁴⁰

Out of prison to stand trial in two more cases, Sharif was convicted in the Al-Azizia Steel Mills case by the NAB on 24 December 2018.⁴¹ The Al-Azizia Steel Mills case refers to a steel conglomerate that Nawaz's elder son, Hussain, claims was established in Saudi Arabia in 2001 with US\$ 5.4 million paid by a Qatari royal on the request of his grandfather. According to the prosecutors, the actual owner of the mills was Nawaz Sharif. However, the NAB could not substantiate the charges, and the burden of proof was

35. 'Timeline-The Three-Time Rise and Fall of Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif', *Reuters*, 6 July 2018.

36. 'Ousted Pakistani PM Sharif Gets 10-Year Jail Term Ahead of Polls', *IBC Group*, 6 July 2018; 'Pakistani Court Sentences Ex-PM Sharif to 10 Years in Prison', *AP News*, 6 July 2018; 'Nawaz Sharif, Ex-Pakistani Leader, is Sentenced to Prison for Corruption', *The New York Times*, 6 July 2018; 'Former Pakistani leader Nawaz Sharif found guilty in corruption case, sentenced to 10 years', *The Washington Post*, 6 July 2018.

37. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', p. 353.

38. The decision to return to Pakistan to be arrested was considered a brave one, possibly the only one that would avoid the end of both Sharif's political career and PML-N. 'Interview: Imran Khan is Pakistan's Donald Trump - and the Army's man, says academic Pervez Hoodbhoy', *Scroll.in*, 23 July 2018.

39. 'What are the ways the Sharifs could appeal the Avenfield verdict?', *Dawn*, 11 July 2018.

40. 'Nawaz, Maryam, Capt Safdar released after suspension of Avenfield sentence by IHC', *The Express Tribune*, 19 September 2018.

41. 'Nawaz Sharif, Former Pakistani Prime Minister, Is Sentenced to 7 Years', *The New York Times*, 24 December 2018; 'Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan ex-PM, sent back to jail for corruption', *BBC News*, 24 December 2018.

placed on Nawaz. He was unable to provide a money trail in the case and was awarded seven-year jail term and a fine of US\$ 25 million. The conviction disqualified him for ten years from any public office.

4. *The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf*

After a career as a famous and charismatic cricketer, Imran Khan started his political experience in 1996, founding and heading the PTI.⁴² The PTI did not become popular until 2012. The 2013 election campaign witnessed the affirmation of a political force that, although still focusing on the same programmatic aspects as before, now had a large number of supporters, especially among the youngest sections of the electorate.

Since its beginning, the focus of the PTI has been on combatting corruption and cronyism to extirpate them from the national institutional and political set-up. In the run-up to the 2013 elections, the PTI had positioned itself as an alternative to the PML-N to guide Pakistan, with a strong electoral base in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and many followers in Punjab. The results of the 2013 elections consolidated the party: the PTI became the second political force in Pakistan after the PML-N, with around 7.5 million votes, and the third largest regarding the number of seats. The PTI received more votes than the main opposition party, the PPP, mostly from the North of Punjab, the FATA and in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁴³ Up to the 2018 elections, Imran's populism and nationalism had succeeded in exciting huge crowds yet without ensuring a majority of votes. However, the PTI approached the 2018 elections as the primary contender of the PML-N and one of the most influential parties in the country. The Panama Papers leak in April 2016, and the consequences on the political career of the former premier, turned in favour of Khan. Also, during the period 2013-2018, the PTI government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa performed well overall.⁴⁴

The PTI is by and large supported by the educated and younger urban middle class. Khan's support base also has elements of the status quo, including feudal elements, and he did not distance himself from the

42. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan: La grande illusione', *Asia Major* 1996, pp. 46-47.

43. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan: Il terzo governo di Nawaz Sharif', *Asia Major* 2013, pp. 83-96.

44. According to some sources, the province has been witnessing a drop in corruption: 'Is It Imran Khan's Turn Yet?', *The Diplomat*, 31 May 2018; 'PTI loses majority in K-P assembly', *The Express Tribune*, 18 April 2018.

Taliban in the past.⁴⁵ Alleged support of the military⁴⁶ underlay the PTI's performance, as highlighted by many commentators much earlier than the 2018 elections.⁴⁷ However, Khan has always rejected the allegations that he and his party are in favour of the generals and that they support jihadist outfits.

At the end of April, Khan started his electoral campaign⁴⁸ and presented an 11-point agenda. The agenda was spelt out further in May 2018, when the PTI chairman unveiled the first 100-day agenda of his party if elected as the ruling government. Speaking at a public gathering at Minar-e-Pakistan, Khan focused his speech on revolutionary transformations in the governance system, revitalisation of economic growth with a reduction of the foreign debt, an efficient tax regime and the creation of an investor and business-friendly environment, better social services and enhanced national security.⁴⁹ These aspirations flew into the party's manifesto, titled «Road to Naya (New) Pakistan», unveiled by the PTI on 9 July 2018. It focused on job creation, promising ten million jobs over a five-year term, and the construction of five million houses for the poor. Strengthening of anti-graft institutions and enhanced capacities of the NAB comprised another tier of actions the party committed to tackling to fight corruption efficiently. Poverty alleviation measures were promised in the poorest districts of the country, along with improvements in the water and sanitation sector. Protection of minorities, gender equality-oriented policies and a better-quality justice to all citizens were also part of the PTI agenda.⁵⁰

45. 'Imran Khan warms to Pakistan's military. His political fortunes rise', *The New York Times*, 6 May 2018; 'Pakistan grants Rs 300 million to madrassa linked to Afghan Taliban', *The Times of India*, 19 June 2016; 'Imran Khan: Another act in Pakistan's circus. It wasn't Imran Khan who won the election. It was (as always) Pakistan's army', *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2018; 'Hundreds With Terror Ties Run in Pakistan Elections', *Voice of America*, 24 July 2018.

46. 'The Stakes In Pakistan's Election: Civil-Military Relations and Beyond', *The Diplomat*, 24 July 2018.

47. As mentioned, in the run-up to the elections, army and intelligence officers were reported to be threatening politicians from competitor parties, so clearing the path for Mr. Khan. Also, accusations of lack of transparency in the ballot counting were reported. 'Pakistan's former spy chief is behind Imran Khan's revolt, claims minister', *The Telegraph*, 12 August 2014; 'Pakistan's Election: Unique for All the Wrong Reasons', *The Diplomat*, 25 July 2018; 'The Rise, Fall And Rise Again Of Imran Khan, Pakistan's Next Leader', *The New York Times*, 26 July 2018; 'Imran Khan is Pakistan's Donald Trump'; 'A Creepy Coup d'Etat in Pakistan', *The Diplomat*, November 2018.

48. 'PTI swings into election mode with big power show', *The Express Tribune*, 29 April 2018.

49. 'PTI reveals 100-day plan ahead of polls', *Pakistan Today*, 20 May 2018; 'PTI lays out post-poll plan for first 100 days', *The Express Tribune*, 20 May 2018.

50. 'Imran promises welfare state in PTI's manifesto', *Daily Times*, 10 July 2018.

5. *The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf's electoral success*

At the 25 July 2018 general elections, the PTI emerged as the largest single party in the National Assembly, with 116 members out of the 272 seats available. Not achieving the majority, alliances and coalitions needed to be forged as the three main opposition parties (PML-N, PPP and MMA – the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, an alliance of religious, political parties) combined still had the numbers to obtain the prime ministership as per the election's results. The PTI began talks with smaller parties and independent candidates. A memorandum of understanding for cooperation was prepared between the PTI and the MQM-P.⁵¹ Khan's party entered an alliance with the PML-Q – the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid e Azam, a centre-nationalist political party – on 31 July 2018.⁵² The BAP (Baluchistan Awami Party, founded in 2018 by dissidents of the PML-N and the PML-Q) announced its support for a PTI-led federal government. Finally, the GDA (Grand Democratic Alliance), an electoral alliance of several parties, also joined the PTI's coalition.

Additionally, the AML (Awami Muslim League), a centrist party formed in 2008, had already vowed its support for the PTI before the elections. Over the few weeks following the elections, other parties pledged their support of the PTI nominees, including the BNP (Baluchistan National Party, committed to achieving more provincial rights and greater autonomy) and the JWP (Jamhoori Watan Party, the Baluchi «Republican National Party»). Also, nine independent candidates joined the PTI-led government,⁵³ which now had 156 seats or 46% of the seats.

The PML-N had 85 seats (25%) and the PPP 54 (16%). The MMA obtained 16 seats. The MQM-P, the BAP and the BNP obtained respectively seven, five and four seats. The PML-Q and the GDA won five and three seats.⁵⁴

Though not a simple majority, the PTI gathered enough seats to form a precarious coalition government.

51. 'MQM-P, PTI will be in govt together', *Daily Messenger*, 3 August 2018.

52. 'PTI gets required number to form govt in Center, Punjab', *The Daily Messenger*, 30 July 2018.

53. As seen, the Senate is controlled by the opposition given that, at the elections of the Upper House held in March 2018, the PML-N emerged as the largest party, followed by the PPP and the PTI.

54. National Assembly of Pakistan (<http://www.na.gov.pk/en/party-stats.php>).

Party	National Assembly
PTI	156
PML-N	85
PPP	54
Independent	4
MMA-Pakistan	16
PML-Q	5
MQM-Pakistan	7
GDA	3
AML	1
ANP	1
BNP	4
BAP	5
JWP	1

Party position of the National Assembly (as of December 2018) – Source: Election Commission of Pakistan

At the provincial level, the PML-N remained the largest party in Punjab, with 167 seats out of the 371 available (297 general seats, 66 reserved for women and eight for non-Muslims). The PTI won fewer seats than the PML-N. However, a large number of «electables» – politicians who switched allegiance from the PML-N to the PTI before the elections – allowed the PTI to add more parliamentary seats in the traditional PML-N stronghold province and obtain 180 seats.⁵⁵ Independent candidates – ten from the PML-Q and seven from the PPP – completed the results, allowing the PTI to form a government in the most populated province of the country.

The PTI confirmed its control of KP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and established a two-thirds majority with 82 seats of the 124 available (99 general seats, 22 reserved for women and three for non-Muslims). Thirteen seats went to the MMA-P and eight to the ANP (Awami National Party, a leftist, secular, and Pashtun nationalistic party). The PML-N and the PPP won six and five seats respectively.⁵⁶

In Sindh, the PPP maintained the majority with 99 seats out of 168,⁵⁷ while the PTI formed part of the opposition alliance, having won 30 seats; the MQM-P won 20 seats and the GDA 14.

55. Provincial Assembly of Punjab (<http://www.pap.gov.pk>): 'Imran Khan's rivals in Pakistan face another big loss', *The New York Times*, 30 July 2018.

56. Provincial Assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (<http://www.pakp.gov.pk>).

57. 'Number of seats in Pakistan National & Provincial Assemblies', *Overseas Pakistani Friends*, 25 August 2018.

The newly-formed BAP became the largest party in Baluchistan with 24 seats of the 65 available (51 general ones, 11 reserved for women and three for non-Muslims) and entered an alliance with the PTI, who won seven seats.⁵⁸ The MMA-P achieved 11 and the BNP ten seats.⁵⁹ The government alliance is composed by the PTI, the BAP, the BNP, and other groups.⁶⁰

Party	Punjab	Sindh	Balochistan	KP
PTI	180	30	7	82
PML-N	167		1	6
PPP	7	99		5
Independent	4		1	
MMA Pakistan		1	11	13
PML-Q	10			
MQM Pakistan		20		
GDA		14		
ANP			4	8
BNP			10	
BAP			24	
BNP Awami			3	
Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan		3		
Pakistan Rah-e-Haq	1			
Hazara Democratic Party			1	
JWP			1	
Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party			1	

Party position of the provincial assemblies (as of December 2018) – Source: Election Commission of Pakistan

Nawaz Sharif, from the prison, called the results «tainted and dubious».⁶¹ Nevertheless, the Election Commission of Pakistan stated that the elections were conducted fairly and freely.⁶² Also, the European Union Elec-

58. 'The Biggest Challenge for Pakistan's Next Prime Minister', *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2018; 'BAP and PTI all set to steer Balochistan', *Pakistan Today*, 31 July 2018.

59. Geo TV, Elections (<https://www.geo.tv/election>).

60. Provincial Assembly of Baluchistan (<http://www.pabalochistan.gov.pk>).

61. 'Pakistan polls: Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf is single-largest party, but will need allies', *Scroll.in*, 27 July 2018; 'Imran Khan's Victory in Pakistan: An Outcome Foretold', *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2018.

62. 'ECP rejects political parties' claim of «rigging» on election day', *The Express Tribune*, 26 July 2018.

tion Observation Mission reported overall acceptable results but a lack of equality of opportunity in the pre-election campaign.⁶³

At the beginning of September 2018, PTI founding member and one of the authors of the party's constitution, Dr. Arif Alvi, was elected as the 13th president of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Alvi got 353 votes out of 432 from the members of the National Assembly and Senate. His political background includes affiliation with the Islami Jamiat Talaba, a student wing of the JI (Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, an Islamist political party) in the late Sixties. In the Seventies, under the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, he ran as a candidate of the JI for the provincial assembly of Sindh. He then left politics and later joined the PTI in 1996 as one of its founding members. In 1997 he became the party's president in Sindh; in 2001 he was nominated PTI vice president; from 2006 to 2013 he was the party's secretary general; and, in 2016, he was nominated PTI president.⁶⁴ In 2013 he was elected as a member of the National Assembly.

Soon after the electoral success, the PTI's anti-corruption campaign embarked upon a set of initial measures taken by the newly elected government aiming to recover funds to be used to tackle Pakistan's balance of payments crisis and its debts.⁶⁵

6. *The acquittal of Asia Bibi*

Aasiya Noreen, a Christian woman commonly known as Asia Bibi, was convicted of blasphemy, arrested and imprisoned in 2009. She had allegedly insulted the Prophet Muhammad after an argument with Muslim co-workers while harvesting berries in Ittan Wali, her village in the Sheikhpura District near Lahore in Punjab. She was then sentenced to death by hanging by a Pakistani court in 2010. Asia Bibi was the first woman in Pakistan to be sentenced to death for blasphemy.⁶⁶

Asia's case received worldwide attention and drew international outrage and condemnation including from heads of state, multilateral organ-

63. 'EU monitors team says Pakistan election not a level playing field', *Geo TV*, 28 July 2018; 'EU piles pressure on Imran Khan after Pakistan election', *The Guardian*, 27 July 2018.

64. 'Arif Alvi: An activist who wants to be an «Active Presidents»', *Arya News*, 4 September 2018; 'The cleric, the lawyer and the partyman', *The Express Tribune*, 4 September 2018; 'Who is Arif Alvi?', *Dunya News*, 4 September 2018; 'Dr Arif ur Rehman Alvi - 10 things to know about the newly elected 13th President of Pakistan', *Dunya News*, 5 September 2018.

65. 'Assets recovery unit established to retrieve offshore assets', *Pakistan Today Profit*, 6 September 2018; 'Imran Khan takes on corruption in Pakistan', *The Diplomat*, 19 October 2018.

66. 'Christian's Death Verdict Spurs Holy Row In Pakistan', *NPR*, 14 December 2010.

isations, human rights groups and other civil society organisations. Extensive media coverage was also granted to the case, and many campaigns and petitions were launched to protest her imprisonment. Multiple requests of appeal were filed by her family members during the years of Asia's detention, and the Supreme Court suspended her death sentence for the duration of the appeals.

After having spent eight years on death row, the Supreme Court acquitted Asia for insufficient evidence in October 2018.⁶⁷ Asia's acquittal triggered violent protests headed by Islamist parties in major cities of Pakistan.

In Pakistan, blasphemy against any recognised religion is prohibited by the penal code, and penalties range from a fine to death. Abusive enforcement of the country's blasphemy laws has resulted in the suppression of rights and forced conversions, with the laws being used against ethnic and religious minorities which face attacks and discrimination from extremist groups and society at large.⁶⁸ The United States Department of State reports the practice of initiating blasphemy complaints against neighbours, peers, or business associates to intimidate them or to settle personal grievances, and recorded instances in which government entities such as the police and courts were complicit in this practice in Pakistan.⁶⁹ By applying sections 295 and 298 of the penal code, since 2011 about 100 blasphemy cases have been registered in Pakistan, with nearly as many people currently serving prison sentences for blasphemy charges.⁷⁰

Asia's case emblematically shows Pakistan's society divided opinion on the blasphemy laws as a part of a larger process involving discriminatory practices against minorities. While the religious extremists condemned the court's verdict, the government and the liberal forces supported it quietly showing their vulnerability to the popularity of the Islamist groups.⁷¹ During the electoral campaign, Imran Khan had overall embraced the blasphemy laws.⁷² Later, after the announcement of Asia Bibi's acquittal, he

67. 'Asia Bibi: Pakistan acquits Christian woman on death row', *BBC News*, 31 October 2018; 'Pakistani Court Acquits Christian Woman in Capital Blasphemy Case', *The New York Times*, 31 October 2018.

68. Farahnaz Ispahani, *Pakistan's Descent into Religious Intolerance*, Hudson Institute, Washington, 1 March 2017; 'Why minorities suffer in Pakistan?', *Daily Times*, 11 January 2017.

69. United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Pakistan 2017 International Religious Freedom Report*, Washington, 2018.

70. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2018*, Washington 2018; 'Religious intolerance towards minorities increasing in Pakistan: UNCIRF', *The Nation*, 30 May 2018.

71. 'Aasia Bibi Is a Test Case for Pakistan', *The Diplomat*, 19 October 2018; 'The Fallout from the Aasia Bibi Blasphemy Verdict', *The Diplomat*, 1 November 2018; 'Greater Than the State Itself: Pakistan's Everyday Extremists Take On Its Institutions', *The Diplomat*, 2 November 2018.

72. 'Imran Khan criticised for defence of Pakistan blasphemy laws', *The Guardian*, 9 July 2018.

supported the verdict. In the following days, the government of Pakistan reached an agreement with the Tehreek-e-Labbaik, the political party which was leading the protests triggered by the decision of the Supreme Court. Under the agreement, Asia would be banned from leaving Pakistan, and a review petition filed against the verdict wouldn't be blocked by the government. In other words, her safety in Pakistan could not be guaranteed.⁷³ Also, according to the agreement, all protesters arrested since Asia Bibi's acquittal will be released, and any violence towards them will be investigated.⁷⁴ This agreement was viewed by many analysts as a capitulation of the institutions to extremists.⁷⁵

The country's administrations have not been ready to amend the blasphemy laws to protect the minority groups adequately, so perpetrating systematic religious freedom violations fearing extremists' reaction. Anyone trying assertively to challenge the blasphemy laws has been assassinated. In 2011, Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Punjab Province who had campaigned for Bibi's release and had criticised the blasphemy laws, was shot dead in Islamabad by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri. After he had turned himself into the police, Qadri was executed yet many hard-line Muslims held him as a martyr. Two months later, Shahbaz Bhatti, the minister of minorities and the only Christian member of Pakistan's cabinet who proposed changes to the blasphemy laws, was also killed in Islamabad. Lawyers defending those accused of blasphemy have also been killed, like the regional coordinator for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Rashed Rehman.⁷⁶ Given this background, the decision of the Supreme Court about Asia's case represents a breakthrough for religious minorities.

7. *Economic scenario*

The internal economic situation inherited by Khan is characterised by a macroeconomic instability with a trade deficit of almost US\$ 34 billion in the financial year 2017-2018. The US\$ 6.7 billion IMF bailout that Pakistan had in 2013, repayments for which have not yet been completed, generated a series of problems for the balance of payments which Imran Khan's government now faces.

73. 'Imran Khan's treatment of Asia Bibi is a dangerous betrayal', *Ibid.*, 13 November 2018. As of December 2018, Asia Bibi was reported to be in hiding in the country.

74. 'Asia Bibi: Deal to end Pakistan protests over blasphemy case', *BBC News*, 3 November 2018

75. 'Pakistan Makes Concessions to Protesters in Blasphemy Case', *The New York Times*, 2 November 2018.

76. 'Pakistani lawyer Rashid Rehman murdered after taking on blasphemy case', *The Independent*, 8 May 2014.

Between July 2017 and March 2018, imports related to energy, machinery and metals increased by roughly 70%, as recorded by the State Bank of Pakistan, while exports, mainly textiles, have increased slightly.⁷⁷

As of the end of November 2018, the national foreign exchange reserves were at US\$ 14.02 billion: US\$ 7.5 billion held by the State Bank of Pakistan and the rest by commercial banks.⁷⁸ Foreign reserves have been steadily eroding, mainly due to servicing of the external debt.⁷⁹ The pace of economic growth has been decelerating, while the high balance of payments deficit (42% in the final quarter of the financial year 2017-2018) exposed Pakistan to external shocks and internal challenges linked to prolonged economic uncertainty.⁸⁰ High inflation and external debt in foreign currency (US dollars), as well as oil prices, are weighing on the country's account deficits.⁸¹

The erosion of the forex reserves and the turbulence of Pakistan's economy have led many analysts to predict that the potentially chronic dependence of the country on IMF bailouts could push Islamabad to borrow from the IMF to fill the external financing gap. In an attempt to strengthen Islamabad's negotiating position with the IMF, Imran Khan requested that Saudi Arabia, China and the United Arab Emirates deposit currency in the central bank of Pakistan to inflate the reserves, and obtained a US\$ 6 billion lifeline from Riyadh in cash assistance and oil on deferred payments for one year.⁸² Rumours anticipated the highest ever loan in Pakistan's history⁸³ and, in October 2018, the IMF confirmed that the minister of finance, revenue and economic affairs and the governor of the State Bank of Pakistan had requested financial assistance with a US\$ 8 billion bailout package.⁸⁴

77. 'Imran and the IMF: Pakistan's bailout dilemma', *Pakistan Today Profit*, 3 August 2018; 'Imran and the IMF: Pakistan's bailout dilemma', *NDTV*, 3 August 2018; 'Economists, business community welcome Imran Khan's pledges for economy, good governance' *Pakistan Today Profit*, 26 July 2018.

78. 'Rising Current Account Deficit: An Outcome of Following Bad Policies', *The Pakistani and Gulf Economist*, 4 June 2018.

79. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', p. 360.

80. 'The looming economic crisis', *The Diplomat*, 2 August 2018.

81. The International Monetary Fund, *IMF Executive Board Concludes First Post-Program Monitoring Discussions with Pakistan*, 6 March 2018.

82. 'PM Imran secures \$6b lifeline from Saudi Arabia', *The Express Tribune*, 24 October 2018.

83. Pakistan has had several IMF financing programmes since 1980, including a US\$ 6.7 billion three-year loan program in 2013: Akbar Zaidi, *Issues in Pakistan's Economy: A Political Economy Perspective*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 2015, pp. 3-11; Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2016: Economic features', *Asia Maior 2016*, p. 386-390.

84. The International Monetary Fund, 'Statement by IMF's Managing Director Christine Lagarde on Pakistan', Press Release N. 18/390, 11 October 2018; 'Pakistan turns to the IMF. The big one', *The Diplomat APAC Risk Update*, 13 October 2018; The International Monetary Fund, 'Statement of the conclusion of an IMF mission to Pakistan', Press Release N. 18/433, 20 November 2018.

Infrastructural investments associated with the CPEC have boosted economic growth and determined an increase in imports of construction materials, so weakening the national currency and pushing inflation higher.⁸⁵ In the fiscal year 2018, Pakistan obtained loans of more than US\$ 5 billion from China to fund infrastructure projects linked to the US\$ 57 billion CPEC associated with China's One Belt One Road and massive imports of Chinese equipment and materials that have impacted Pakistan's current account deficit.⁸⁶

8. *The challenging US-Pakistan bilateral relationship*

Pakistan in 2018 seemed to lose its credibility in relation to US strategic planning, partially because of the frustrations of Washington with Islamabad's role in containing terrorist outfits in Afghanistan. The Pakistan-based cross-border terror is a top priority for the Trump administration because it targets US troops in Afghanistan.⁸⁷

In 2018, Pakistan-US relations started with the Trump administration's announcement of the suspension of US\$ 900 million military aid, inclusive of Coalition Support Fund (CSF) reimbursements⁸⁸ and a US\$ 255 million tranche of foreign military financing payments, due to the ineffective support provided by the country in combating militants in Afghanistan.⁸⁹ US president Trump's first tweet of 2018 accused Pakistan of having given the United States «nothing but lies and deceit»⁹⁰ and this despite the United States having disbursed US\$ 33 billion into Pakistan over the last 15 years.⁹¹

In February 2018, the US indicated that Pakistan could be placed on a watch list of countries that are not countering terrorism financing enough.⁹²

85. 'Here's why Pakistan faces an economic crisis no matter who wins this week's election', *MarketWatch*, 25 July 2018.

86. 'Pakistan set to seek up to \$12bn IMF bailout', *Financial Times*, 29 July 2018. 'Pakistan seeks record IMF bailout of \$10-12 billion: Financial Times', *Pakistan Today Profit*, 30 July 2018.

87. 'Michael Kugelman on Pakistan's future under Imran Khan', *The Diplomat*, 20 August 2018.

88. The Coalition Support Fund was the US reimbursement supporting the costs, above the regular military costs, incurred by Pakistan in fighting terrorism: Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan: Transizione e Nuovi Equilibri', *Asia Maior 2012*, p. 136.

89. 'America suspends entire security aid to Pakistan', *Dawn*, 5 January 2018.

90. 'Nothing but lies and deceit: Trump launches Twitter attack on Pakistan', *The Guardian*, 1 January 2018.

91. 'Trump, Pakistan, and Kashmir', *The Diplomat*, 20 February 2018. According to an estimate of the Center for Global Development, the United States disbursed about US\$ 67 billion to Pakistan between 1951 and 2011: Centre for Global Development, *Aid to Pakistan by Numbers*, September 2013.

92. 'U.S. May Seek to Put Pakistan on Terrorism-Finance List', *The New York Times*, 14 February 2018; 'Impact Of FATF Decision on Pakistan's Economy', *Pakistan & Gulf Economy*, 2 July 2018.

In June 2018, the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) agreed to place Pakistan on the «Improving Global Anti Money Laundering/Countering Financing of Terrorism Compliance» list.⁹³

In early August 2018, the US suspended the training and educational programmes addressing Pakistan military officers that had been part of the security assistance for more than a decade.⁹⁴

The Trump administration has criticised China's lending to Pakistan as leading to unsustainable debt. Following the election of Imran Khan, the US secretary of state Mike Pompeo expressed concerns – dismissed by Islamabad – and warned Pakistan from seeking an IMF bailout to pay Chinese lenders.⁹⁵ In September 2018, a few days before Pompeo's visit to Islamabad, the US administration confirmed the previously announced cancellation of a US\$ 300 million tranche of CSF reimbursements.⁹⁶

93. The FATF is an intergovernmental body that was established in 1989 to counter money laundering, terrorism-financing and other related threats. It does not issue legally binding sanctions, yet countries placed on its list face international scrutiny and pressure. 'FATF officially sanctions to put Pakistan on «grey» list', *Profit*, 28 June 2018; 'Pakistan formally placed on FATF grey list', *The Express Tribune*, 30 June 2018; 'At U.S. Urging, Pakistan to Be Placed on Terrorism-Financing List', *The New York Times*, 23 February 2018.

94. 'US bars Pakistani military officers from training programs', *The New York Post*, 10 August 2018.

95. 'U.S.' Pompeo warns against IMF bailout for Pakistan that aids China', *Pakistan Today Profit*, 31 July 2018.

96. 'The tipping point in Pak-US ties', *Daily Times*, 3 September 2018; 'Pompeo Heads To Pakistan to Take on Terrorism, Seek «Reset»', *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2018.

