

DELICATE COALITIONS AND DEEP DIVISIONS: THE QUEST FOR POLITICAL STABILITY

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In the complex tapestry of Pakistan's political landscape, the quest for political stability remains an elusive pursuit. The aftermath of the Feb. 8 general elections has not brought the clarity or unity many had hoped for. Instead, it has ushered in an era marked by heightened polarisation within an already divided political environment.¹ The elections, far from resolving the country's political uncertainties, have further complicated the structure of power. With no single party enjoying a comfortable majority in parliament, the current government finds itself in a precarious position, heavily reliant on the support of other parties to maintain its tenuous hold on office.

This fragility is compounded by the presence of a formidable opposition, stronger and more united than its 2018 predecessor, which relentlessly challenges the government at every turn. Adding to the government's woes are persistent doubts surrounding the legitimacy of the election results, casting long shadows over the newly elected officials and their capacity to govern effectively.

Amidst this turmoil, the central question that emerges is whether this delicate

political balance will offer the new government the breathing room it needs to navigate governance challenges. Or, conversely, will Pakistan continue to see an escalation in political confrontation, further destabilizing the country's already precarious political environment? This article seeks to explore these dynamics, delving into the intricate interplay of factors that contribute to Pakistan's ongoing struggle for political stability. It also raises critical questions about the potential for effective governance amidst such relentless political strife and uncertainty.

In the ever-turbulent political landscape of Pakistan, the Feb 2024 polls have only deepened the country's enduring crisis of political stability. This pivotal electoral event, marked by a prolonged period of uncertainty regarding its timing, starkly contrasts with the conventional role of general elections in other developing countries. Typically, such elections are seen as opportunities to resolve political impasses and forge new governance paths. Yet, in Pakistan, they serve to accentuate existing divisions and escalate political confrontations.

The 2024 elections underscore a distinctive and cyclical phenomenon in

¹ Shamil Shams, "Pakistan: Elections fail to end political instability," *DW*, February 09, 2024, [https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-general-elections-fail-to-end-political-instability/a-](https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-general-elections-fail-to-end-political-instability/a-68220192#:~:text=The%20February%20%20elections%20have,Pakistan's%20lower%20house%20of%20parliament.)

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Pakistani politics: the fluidity of political fortunes and the evolving roles of political entities. Parties that emerged victorious in the 2018 elections found themselves on the losing end in 2024, highlighting the volatile and unpredictable nature of Pakistan's electoral dynamics. This cycle of reversal is further complicated by shifting allegiances and accusations. Parties that previously cried foul over alleged election rigging and external interference have now embraced the outcomes of the latest elections, which they once contested. Meanwhile, those who were perceived as beneficiaries of such external influences in the past are currently lamenting a perceived theft of their mandate.

This sets the stage for continuation of political instability in Pakistan. What we are seeing is a picture of a political arena characterized by its perpetual state of flux.

The political environment is highly charged and complex, marked by deep divisions and ongoing confrontations among the major political entities. At the heart of this turmoil is the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), which vehemently contests the legitimacy of the recent electoral outcomes.² PTI alleges that its electoral victory was unjustly denied

through a collaborative manipulation involving the military, the Election Commission, and key political rivals, notably the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

The resultant political structure sees the PML-N at the helm of a coalition government, drawing support from the PPP and the Mutihida Qaumi Movement (MQM) to maintain a semblance of control at the federal level. This coalition, however, is met with strong opposition from the PTI, which has taken its grievances to the streets, leading widespread protests against the coalition government.

Provincial politics mirror the tumultuous nature of the federal landscape but with localized dynamics. In Punjab, the PML-N's administration faces a spirited challenge from the PTI, underscoring the intensity of political rivalry.³ Conversely, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa presents a different picture, with the PTI securing a majority government⁴, facing minimal opposition, primarily from the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) led by Maulana Fazl ur Rehman. Sindh tells yet another story, with the PPP commanding a majority government and the MQM positioning itself as the leading opposition, even as the PTI and other

² Nadim Asrar and Areesha Lodhi, "Pakistan election updates: Crackdown threats as PTI protests 'rigging'," *Al Jazeera*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/2/11/pakistan-election-results-live-wait-for-final-tally-three-days-after-vote>.

³ Muhammad Ilyas, "PML-N's CM hopeful faces tough test," *The Express Tribune*, February 23, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2457313/pml-ns-cm-hopeful-faces-tough-test>.

⁴ Manzoor Ali and Umer Farooq, "PTI-backed candidates claim landslide victory," *Dawn*, February 10, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1812859>.

parties continue their protests on the streets. Balochistan has gotten a coalition led by the PPP, supported by the PML-N and other actors, highlighting a complex web of alliances and oppositions across the country.

This intricate political setup presents a landscape where strong provincial governments stand in contrast to a comparatively weaker federal government. The PTI's strategic positioning as both a formal opposition in the assemblies and an active protester on the streets poses a significant challenge not only to the legislative processes but also to the broader stability of the political order. The threat of these protests turning violent or becoming more widespread introduces an element of unpredictability and potential crisis.

The PTI's focus on assembly protests could potentially offer a pathway to addressing some of the prevailing tensions. However, the likelihood of relying on law enforcement and military intervention to maintain order further escalates the political temperature, hinting at a deeper entrenchment of the existing divisions. The PML-N-led government's dependence on these forces to assert control furthermore underscores a delicate balance of power, fraught with the potential for increased political unrest and challenges to governance. This dynamic environment signals a period of sustained political

mobilization and contention, with PTI's actions on the streets and in the assemblies set to dominate the political discourse and shape the trajectory of Pakistan's political stability.

Achieving a semblance of stability in Pakistan's tumultuous political landscape requires initiating a comprehensive political process that emphasizes reconciliation and compromise. This process demands meticulous efforts to recognize and address the concerns of all involved parties, striving to identify a common ground that facilitates constructive engagement and dialogue. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) emerges as a potentially pivotal player in this context, possessing the nuanced capability to mediate between PML-N and PTI. Moreover, the PPP's capacity to engage in backchannel communications with the military could prove instrumental in navigating the complex interplay of forces and facilitating a broader consensus.

The core demands from PTI, which form the crux of its current stance, revolve around the release of its incarcerated political workers and leaders, alongside a thorough review of the political cases against its figurehead, Imran Khan.⁵ These demands underscore the PTI's quest for what it perceives as justice and fairness in the political arena. On the flip side, the PML-N, along with other key

⁵ Zulfiqar Ahmad, "PTI demands release of IK, other party leaders through resolution," *Business Recorder*, March 06, 2024,

<https://www.brecorder.com/news/40292195/pti-demands-release-of-ik-other-party-leaders-through-resolution>.

stakeholders, calls for a demonstration of political maturity from the PTI. This involves an acceptance of the electoral outcomes and an embracement of its role as an effective opposition within the parliamentary framework. Such a step is viewed as essential not only for the PTI's transformation into a constructive political force but also for ensuring the continuity of the political system, thereby contributing to the overarching goal of national stability.

The envisaged reconciliation process must navigate these divergent expectations with care, recognizing the imperative of external influences, notably the military's role, in shaping the political dynamics of Pakistan. The military, as a significant external stakeholder, has historically played a critical role in the country's politics⁶, and its position and reactions could significantly influence the feasibility and success of any reconciliation efforts.

For the new government, therefore, crafting a path toward stability involves more than just political maneuvering within the assemblies or the streets. It necessitates a holistic strategy that accommodates the grievances and aspirations of all parties, facilitated by entities like the PPP that hold the unique ability to act as intermediaries. Such a strategy should aim not only to bridge the current divides but also to lay the

groundwork for a more inclusive and stable political process. This involves recognizing the delicate balance of power and the need for a concerted effort to transcend the prevailing political impasse, fostering a political culture that prioritizes national interest and stability over partisan gains.

Since 2017-18, Pakistan's governance structure has undergone a notable transformation towards what is often referred to as a hybrid system. This arrangement saw a significant shift in the balance of power towards the military. The inauguration of Imran Khan's PTI-led government in 2018 represented the first instance of this hybrid model, where the military was explicitly integrated into the realms of political, economic, and foreign policy decision-making, extending beyond its conventional mandate.

The underpinnings of the PTI government's political challenges trace back to disagreements between the key political and military leaders of the time, notably between Prime Minister Imran Khan and Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa. The dynamic between these figures began to sour, culminating in the March-April 2022 Vote-of-No-Confidence against Imran Khan⁷. The motion succeeded primarily because the military withdrew its support from the PTI government, a shift long advocated

⁶ S. Akbar Zaidi, "Military's continued interference," *Dawn*, April 05, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1097757>.

⁷ "Pakistan PM Imran Khan gone after losing no-confidence vote," *Al Jazeera*, April 09, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/9/pakistan-prime-minister-imran-khan-no-confidence-vote>.

by opposition parties such as the PML-N and PPP since 2018.

The subsequent formation of a coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif, under the banner of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), did not ease political tensions. Rather, the confrontation escalated, particularly between the PTI and the military. In this period, Imran Khan levied serious accusations against the military, alleging collusion with the United States to undermine his government in favor of the PDM⁸. The transition of military leadership in November 2022 stood out as particularly fraught, marked by Imran Khan's contentious role and his refusal to mend fences with the new military command, which led to a renewed phase of confrontation, epitomized by the events of May 9.

Amid these political upheavals, the military began to assert its influence over economic policy decisively, notably through the establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC)⁹. The SIFC was envisioned as a central body to attract and foster foreign investment, signaling the military's expanding role in economic governance. Under the second government led by Shehbaz Sharif, the SIFC is poised to play a pivotal role in economic decision-

making and the implementation of an impending IMF program.

This involvement underscores a broader trend of military engagement in governance that extends beyond security and defense to encompass key aspects of economic policy. However, this shift raises questions about the capacity of the government to pursue necessary structural reforms for sustainable economic recovery, given the limited political capital and the increasingly prominent role of the military in governing affairs. This evolving governance model presents a complex scenario where the lines between military and civilian domains blur, with profound implications for Pakistan's political and economic landscape.

The new coalition government in Pakistan, bolstered by military support, has prioritized the implementation of an IMF program as a key strategy for ensuring economic security. There is, however, a critical link between economic initiatives and the broader political environment. The potential success of these economic measures can be significantly hampered by ongoing political polarization and instability within the country. In this context, it becomes increasingly clear that the military leadership has a vested interest

⁸ Ryan Grim, "IMRAN KHAN: U.S. WAS MANIPULATED BY PAKISTAN MILITARY INTO BACKING OVERTHROW," *The Intercept*, June 05,

2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/06/05/imran-khan-interview/>.

⁹ Ehsan Malik, "SIFC's task," *Dawn*, September 23, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1777437>.

in fostering political reconciliation among the various stakeholders.

The call by the army chief for a "healing touch" to transcend the "politics of anarchy and polarization"¹⁰ reflects a recognition of the need for a unified approach to governance and economic recovery. Such a statement, made in the immediate aftermath of the elections, signals an understanding that the path to economic stability is inextricably linked to political harmony. For these reconciliation efforts to truly take root and effect meaningful change, they must begin with the military leadership not only endorsing these efforts but also actively demonstrating their commitment through visible and concrete actions.

The military's active backing and ownership of the political reconciliation process are imperative for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, it would serve to legitimize the reconciliation efforts in the eyes of the public and the political entities involved, given the significant influence the military commands in Pakistan. Secondly, visible support from the military could act as a catalyst for trust-building among the political factions, encouraging them to engage in dialogue and compromise. Lastly, by actively participating in and championing these efforts, the military can help steer the country towards a more stable and cooperative political

landscape, which is essential for the successful implementation of economic reforms and the attraction of foreign investment.

The military's engagement in and ownership of political reconciliation efforts are, therefore, crucial for breaking the cycle of political instability and polarization that hinders economic progress. Such a stance would not only align with the military's broader role in national security but also contribute to creating a conducive environment for achieving economic security and sustainable development.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's tenure at the helm of the coalition government presents a complex array of challenges, particularly in maintaining cohesion among his ruling allies. The intricacies of coalition politics are pronounced given that no single party within the alliance holds a simple majority. Though PML-N is the coalition leader it requires active support of PPP and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) for its survival in office.

The task of steering such a coalition towards addressing Pakistan's pressing political, economic, and security challenges will significantly test PM Sharif's leadership skills. A key obstacle arises from the PPP's decision not to join the cabinet, thereby placing an increased burden on the PML-N while

¹⁰ "Army chief backs efforts towards 'healing' alliances," *Dawn*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1813201>.

simultaneously making the former's support crucial for the government's functionality, especially on pivotal issues. This dynamic affords the PPP considerable leverage, enabling it to potentially influence the coalition's direction or withhold support if it perceives that its interests are being compromised.

The delicate balance of power within the coalition means that making difficult decisions becomes a formidable task for the PML-N. This scenario is likely to compel the party to lean more heavily on the military for support in governance and economic decision-making. Such reliance heralds a continuation of hybrid governance, albeit under the new conditions of a weak coalition government constrained by the competing interests and demands of its constituent parties.

The new government in Pakistan, led by the PML-N at the federal level, faces an intricate challenge that extends beyond the complexities of coalition politics. A significant internal dilemma is poised to arise from the populist spending demands emanating from the PML-N's own provincial government in Punjab, helmed by Maryam Nawaz. Following a less than favorable outcome in the recent elections, the PML-N's strategy in Punjab is sharply focused on recapturing its political stronghold by appealing directly to the voters through increased spending. The party aims to rehabilitate its image and regain its lost voter base by embarking on a series of populist

initiatives intended to secure public favor.

However, this strategy is set against the backdrop of Pakistan's broader financial constraints, making it a contentious issue at the federal level. The country's precarious economic situation, marked by a need for fiscal prudence and adherence to stringent financial measures possibly dictated by international financial institutions like the IMF, stands in stark contradiction to the expansive spending plans proposed by the Punjab government. Such divergent approaches within the PML-N are likely to precipitate internal tensions, as the federal leadership grapples with balancing the economic imperatives of austerity against the political pressures to deliver on populist promises.

The potential pushback from the federal government against the Punjab government's spending spree could highlight a critical fault line within the PML-N, posing a direct challenge to the party's unity and strategic coherence. This internal conflict would not only underscore the difficulty of managing economic policy in a politically fragmented landscape but also reflect the broader challenge of pursuing national financial stability while attempting to address local political ambitions.

The balance between civilian authority and military power remains a critical aspect of Pakistan's political landscape, presenting a significant challenge for the coalition government and, in particular,

PM Sharif. In the near term, decisions regarding a series of military appointments and extensions are poised to be a litmus test for the health and stability of the governing coalition. Among these, the notable decision that lies ahead for PM Sharif is whether to approve another extension for the current Director-General of the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), who is already serving on an extension. Granting another extension, while politically sensitive, could set a precedent for extending the tenure of the Army Chief, Gen Munir, in early 2025, a move that would be strategically significant for the Prime Minister, considering the Army Chief's pivotal role in the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) and the current political configuration.

As discussions around the Army Chief's successor are anticipated to begin by January 2025, the central question of whether the PPP and other coalition partners will support PM Sharif's preferences adds another layer of complexity. The reaction of the opposition, particularly the PTI, to these military extensions will further complicate the political landscape, potentially bringing new challenges to the fore for PM Sharif and the PML-N, more so than for other political actors.

The backdrop to these civil-military dynamics is a country that has been navigating through successive crises, with both political and non-political decision-makers engaged in a continuous struggle to address immediate emergencies. These range from securing financial bailouts to countering terrorism¹¹, while also striving to provide governance and attract foreign investment. Despite these efforts, the foundations for long-term stability remain elusive, with even the electoral process leading to increased discontent. While the immediate threat to state stability may be managed, the ongoing domestic instability poses a persistent challenge, undermining efforts to project a sense of normalcy and stability. This complex interplay of civil-military relations, political coalitions, and the broader political-economy of the country underscores the intricate challenges facing PM Shehbaz Sharif's government as it navigates the delicate balance of power, governance, and economic recovery.

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¹¹ Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan battles rising terror threat in Afghan border regions," *Financial Times*, January 29, 2024,

<https://www.ft.com/content/f739d848-5061-412e-b55a-027502925a64>.