



Pakistan elections: Extremist candidates are a real setback for the country

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- A significant amount of candidates in Pakistan's general election, both at the provincial and national level, are linked to extremist political factions.
- Their presence risks legitimizing fundamentalist ideologies in a country struggling with homegrown terrorism.
- If one party fails to win a majority, hard-line factions could play a part in a potential coalition government.

Supporters of Pakistani cricketer turned politician Imran Khan of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice) attend a campaign rally in Karachi on July 22, 2018.

Pakistanis head to the polls Wednesday in a general election characterized by a heavy presence of extremist parties — a development that threatens to strengthen religious radicalization in the South Asian nation, which has long struggled with domestic terrorism.

Right-wing religious factions have fielded more than 1,500 candidates at the provincial and national level, according to Reuters. Many of those entities espouse a fundamentalist agenda laden with anti-Western rhetoric and a desire for tougher application of Islamic law.

Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan, for example, has 566 candidates and wants greater implementation of a law that carries a potential death sentence for anyone who insults Islam. In May, one of its members was deemed responsible for an assassination attempt on Pakistan's interior minister.

Other parties associated with terror outfits are officially banned in the country but their candidates are either running under different party names or as independents. The Milli Muslim League, whose leader Hafiz Saeed is the co-founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba, the terror network behind the 2008 Mumbai attack, is officially outlawed but has around 260 candidates, Reuters data show. Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, believed to be a wing of Islamic State ally Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, also lacks legal standing but has more than 150 candidates.

Islamist parties — those that believe Islamic values should be applied to politics — are common in Pakistan, so their participation in this year's election isn't significant in itself. But their amplified presence could see ultra-conservatism grow.

"The particular worry for Pakistan's long-term stability is the presence of candidates standing for and fear-mongering with ideas of dividing Pakistan's social fabric, including through violence," said Antoine Levesques, research fellow for South Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The election comes as the West increasingly pressures Islamabad to crack down on homegrown militancy. The country returned to the "grey list" of the Financial Action Task Force, a global anti-terror financing watchdog, last month for the first time since 2015. And earlier this year, the White House suspended all U.S. security assistance until the Muslim-majority nation takes action against the Taliban and Haqqani network that conduct terrorist operations from Pakistani soil.

"The 'extremist' tag has hurt Pakistan constantly among Western audiences — the more visibility such actors have in mainstream politics, the tougher it will be for Pakistan to defend its image," said Moeed Yusuf, associate vice president of the Asia center at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

"Having their rhetoric in the political mainstream is unprecedented, and is a real setback to any hope of countering extremism in Pakistan," echoed a recent Brookings report.

Legitimizing extremism

Wednesday's vote is largely between ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League and former cricket star Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. None of the religious factions are expected to emerge victorious, but the extent of their influence on society is worrisome, experts said.

The big issue is that they may play a part in a potential coalition government, said Shandana Mohmand, research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies.

"Most analyses to date suggest that any one party will find it difficult to get a simple majority to form government, so a coalition will be required," she explained: "And within this coalition, religious parties may end up providing crucial numbers, and therefore, have some control over the agenda over the following five years."

The proliferation of terrorism-affiliated groups in this year's election has been tied to Pakistan's military, which is widely believed to have allowed extremists to infiltrate politics in hopes of neutralizing the threat they pose.

Many hard-line candidates "feel that their entry into politics has been blessed by elements within the Pakistani state apparatus," said Yusuf, adding that "this insinuation of collusion gives them an aura of legitimacy that doesn't bode well for mainstream politics in the country."

The army has denied such claims, local news media reported.

The number of candidates linked to militant units also reveals "how certain terrorist groups like Lashkar e-Taiba are focusing on diversifying their portfolio so that if the Pakistani security establishment decides to go after them, they will still be able to function in Pakistan through other means," warned Sahar Khan, visiting research fellow at the Cato Institute think tank.

But the proliferation of fundamentalist actors in politics won't necessarily translate to an increase in terrorism, she noted. Religious extremism in the developing state isn't directly tied to Islamist parties, but is instead a product of the military's inconsistent policies, Khan argued.

China will be watching closely

Wednesday's vote is of particular interest to the world's second-largest economy, which has invested heavily in the South Asian state through Chinese President Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road program. The Pakistan-China Economic Corridor, for example, had 22 projects worth \$28.6 billion under construction as of July.

"Never before has the outcome and subtext of a general election in Pakistan, including perceptions around normalizing extremism, mattered as much for Pakistan's immediate neighbor China," Levesques told CNBC.