



Pakistan's democracy in the balance

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Pakistan will go to the polls on Wednesday to elect a new prime minister in what will be the country's second ever civilian-to-civilian transfer of power.

Why it matters: Pakistan is a nuclear power with volatile relationships with the U.S. and its neighbors, India and Afghanistan. An election that could have been a democratic breakthrough has been fraught by violence and military meddling. Things could still get worse. “We could be heading for a period of prolonged instability if you have a hung parliament,” says Ashley Tellis, a former State Department official now at the Carnegie Endowment.

The key players and political parties...

- **Nawaz Sharif and PML-N:** Sharif was removed as prime minister in 2017 over corruption charges, a move he claims was engineered by the military. He returned to Pakistan from London on July 13 to turn himself in, and his arrest has taken the electorate by storm.
- **Imran Khan and PTI:** A former cricket star, Khan is a polarizing political outsider with some powerful behind-the-scenes allies. “The military and intelligence services have really propped him up as their tool to destroy the two mainstream parties,” Tellis says.
- **Shehbaz Sharif,** Nawaz’s brother, is now leading PML-N, which is running neck-and-neck with PTI.
- **Bilawal Bhutto Zardari,** the 29-year-old scion of a political dynasty, leads the PPP party, which trails the other two.

Al Jazeera’s Asad Hashim has been [reporting from rural Pakistan](#) on allegations the military is tipping the scales:

- A local tribal chief and politician told Hashim the military has intimidated voters and offered incentives to switch loyalties, from installing electricity transformers to offering to release relatives allegedly “disappeared” by the intelligence services.
- A PPP leader [said](#) at least three of the party’s candidates had been threatened by people identifying themselves as military officers, while in impoverished Balochistan a new party popped up with unofficial military support and is suddenly fielding dozens of candidates.

What the military ultimately wants is a fragile government it can control by using its carrots and sticks to manipulate key votes. It's on course to get it, according to Javid Ahmad of the Atlantic Council: "The relationship between the military and the elected civilian governments is like two scorpions in a bottle — contentious, territorial, and deadly. This election, however, is particularly significant because the military is actively engineering the outcome."

- **Politically-motivated attacks** this month have left more than 150 dead, Sahar Khan of the Cato Institute writes for Axios Expert Voices: "The increase in violence spells trouble for election day, and although the military has stepped in for security purposes, it is also involved in intimidation."

What to watch...

- If PML-N (or PPP) ends up in the driver's seat, Tellis says, "there will be some hope" for Pakistani democracy, while a hung parliament with Khan at its center would all but guarantee the military calls the shots.
- After a political whirlwind that lasts two weeks or so, Pakistan's next government will face a harsh economic reality as well, says the Stimson Center's Sameer Lalwani: "Pakistan is going to face a currency crisis soon," he says, "and it doesn't have any good options besides seeking another loan."
- **The bottom line:** "Pakistan is too dangerous to fail," says Ahmad. "The new government will need to engage in some introspection and determine whether Pakistan can afford further regional and international isolation."