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Young voters will shape Pakistan's future, and many are ready for fresh leadership

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Ahead of critical parliamentary elections Wednesday, Pakistan's increasingly youthful electorate is gearing up to play a major role in selecting leaders from a ballot chock-full of populists and resurfaced radicals.

For one of Washington's most critical but prickly allies, the election will mark — in a country with a history of repeated military coups, the last in 1999 — the second consecutive peaceful transition of power. The results could prove critical to Trump administration hopes for better cooperation in the fight against radical Islamist groups in neighboring Afghanistan.

Spotlighted in the race for prime minister are outspoken nationalist Imran Khan of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI), the charismatic former cricket star widely considered the front-runner, and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), who is appealing a 10-year jail sentence for graft as his party tries to cling to power.

Mr. Khan has run on a largely populist message, excoriating the government for its corruption and ethical lapses. But reports of military manipulation in his favor, including the arrest and suppression of pro-Nawaz journalists and media outlets, have cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election.

Many fear violence and a lengthy challenge to the result no matter who wins. Final results are not expected until the end of the week.

Nevertheless, Mr. Khan and the PTI's message may resonate with younger voters hungry for fresh leadership. The nation's political landscape has been dominated since 1998 by the PML-N and the left-leaning Pakistan People's Party, once headed by Benazir Bhutto.

With 44 percent of the country's nearly 106 million voters younger than 35, the youth will have a critical voice in deciding the direction of Pakistan, analysts say.

"I am now convinced without any hesitation that the future of Pakistan, good or bad, will be decided by those who are between 15 and 29 years of age," said Adil Najam, dean of the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University, speaking at a forum last week at the United States Institute for Peace.

A recent United Nations Development Program report co-authored by Mr. Najam found that despite profound distrust in the country's politicians, 80 out of 100 Pakistani youths say they will vote Wednesday. Many voters complained that they felt they had little control over decisions that affect them.

But the election will be a test of the country's democracy, with a range of far-right religious candidates on the ballot once considered to be too extreme to run. Once again, the way the youth vote breaks could be critical to the final result.

"I think the youth, in general, are a lot less religiously inclined than we tend to think. So my sense is that the Pakistani youth is more concerned with economic gains and employment opportunities than, say, religion and extremism," Sahar Khan, a visiting research fellow from the libertarian Cato Institute, said in an interview.

Mr. Khan said extremist groups do not have as much reach with young people as some fear.

"My sense is these religious extremist candidates don't have a chance of winning. The youth are more interested in employment opportunities, and they also realize that these small political parties can't win on the national stage," she said.

Tensions were exacerbated when Mr. Sharif, the former prime minister, and his daughter were arrested this month. Mr. Sharif was banned from politics for life, and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, took over the party's helm.

Mr. Sharif and his daughter were sentenced in absentia on corruption charges relating to disclosures in the 2016 leaked Panama Papers. They were subsequently arrested in Lahore on the same day that an Islamic State suicide bomber killed 149 at a campaign rally in the northern Mastung region. The attack was the second-deadliest terrorist attack in Pakistan's history.

Among a wave of conservative religious figures seeking a seat in the National Assembly is cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi of the far-right Tehreek-e-Labbaik, who has made waves along the campaign trail with his vehement anti-Western rhetoric.

"If I'm given the atom bomb, I would wipe Holland off from the face of the earth before they can hold a competition of caricatures," Mr. Rizvi recently told journalists at the Karachi Press Club, referring to a Dutch competition of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.