

Scenario 281

WORLD MEDIA ON ELECTIONS-2024

See an article published at [//TIME.com](https://www.time.com) dated 9th February 2024:

- **Preliminary results of Pakistan's election Thursday seem to show surprising success by Imran Khan's repressed PTI party. What that means for the future of the country is uncertain.**
 - Charlie.Campbell@time.com

"He's been shot, jailed, had his political party effectively banned, and name purged from mainstream media. But you just can't keep Imran Khan down.

Preliminary results from Thursday's election in Pakistan seem to show that independent candidates affiliated with Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party have a chance of securing a plurality of legislative seats despite myriad irregularities, which continued through polling day, designed to hobble such an outcome.

The PTI already had its famed cricket-bat logo banned, and a nationwide suspension of cellphone networks on Thursday (8th Feb 2024) hindered party officials from informing supporters of their preferred independent candidate for each constituency. (The government claimed the blackout was for security reasons despite such measures being deemed illegal by Pakistan's High Court.) In addition, exit polls were banned and the PTI complained that their agents were barred from monitoring polling stations. 'The amount of rigging going on is beyond ridiculous,' Zulfi Bukhari, a former Minister of State under Khan, tells TIME.

Still, when results finally started trickling in—over 10 hours later than customary, which in itself observers say is highly suspicious—the PTI was neck and neck with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of three-time former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, with the

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of assassinated ex-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, in third place.

Sharif is the preferred candidate of Pakistan's powerful military, which, despite backing his ouster thrice in the past, recently allowed the 74-year-old back from exile in the U.K., quashed his corruption conviction, and repealed his lifetime ban from politics. Sharif's speedy rehabilitation stood in stark contrast to the generals' Khan-and-PTI purge.....

Yet even if the PTI against all odds secures a plurality of legislative seats, many obstacles to forming a government remain.

*Since its lawmakers are officially independents, there's no obligation for them to vote along party lines for key appointments, raising the prospect of coerced defections. Moreover, the PTI is not eligible to its share of the National Assembly's **70 "reserved seats" for women and minorities** that are divvied up according to a party's proportion of the overall vote. And then there's the fact that Khan, 71, remains in prison and was unable to stand as a lawmaker himself. Even before the vote, there were widespread rumors of a power-sharing pact between the PML-N and PPP, with Sharif serving as prime minister and Zardari as president. A coalition between the two remains the most likely outcome.*

Still, the strength of PTI's showing is a bloody nose for Pakistan's military, which previously backed Khan before his 2018 election victory. However, the generals fell out spectacularly with the former national cricket captain and engineered his ouster in an April 2022 no-confidence vote. Since then, Khan has survived an assassination attempt and weathered a tsunami of over 180 legal challenges. In recent weeks alone, he received prison sentences totaling 31 years for corruption, leaking state secrets, and having an "un-Islamic" marriage.

Yet his popularity remained strong leading up to the vote, especially among young Pakistanis, with voters aged 18-35 comprising 45% of the nearly 130 million-strong electorate. 'It's very clear that to see PTI exceed expectations is absolutely a big blow, says Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center.

The Pakistani public and political class now await the full results and, no doubt, much horse-trading to come. The nuclear-armed

nation of 240 million can little afford a power vacuum with whoever ends up taking the top job facing no shortage of crises. Pakistanis are suffering with Asia's highest inflation, which reached 29.7% year-over-year in December (2023). The South Asian nation only narrowly avoided a sovereign default last summer due to a \$3 billion IMF bailout and a new deal by next month is thought essential to avoid economic collapse.

Pakistan also faces an increasingly tense security situation on its borders. Despite strong historic ties with the Afghan Taliban, Islamabad has recently fallen out with Kabul over cross-border terrorist attacks and Pakistan's expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees, many of whom have lived inside the country for decades. And last month, Pakistan and Iran exchanged tit-for-tat air strikes on alleged militant bases on each other's territory. What's more, Islamabad recently accused India of running an assassination campaign inside its territory, further fraying ties with its historic nemesis to the east.

And presuming Pakistan's military continues to pursue its goal of shutting the PTI out of power, the question remains how PTI supporters will react to their disenfranchisement, not least given the grim state of the economy. On May 9, PTI supporters ransacked military premises in response to an earlier, fleeting arrest of Khan. He may remain behind bars, but Thursday's election shows the sporting icon is far from done as a political force.

'The military wants the next government to focus on economic recovery and clearly hoped it could put the Imran Khan genie back into the bottle by having him in jail for a few years. But the challenges are only going to grow because the PTI base will only become more aggrieved', says Kugelman."

LEVEL-PLAYING FIELD FOR ALL?

Taking start from a little before the election-2024, **BBC** dated **31st January 2024** observed that:

"Pakistan is in unprecedented times. Anger, disappointment, and hope are all intertwined. This Muslim-majority country of 241 million is about to vote in a civilian parliament for the third

*time in a row. **But the 8 February vote is still taking place in the shadows of alleged interference (by many).***

No election in the country's history was held without its controversies, but this one was racking up more than most - not least the fact one former prime minister (Imran Khan) was kept behind bars, unable to stand and contest, while another (Nawaz Sharif) re-emerged from self-imposed exile, his criminal convictions were also swept away and also providing him state protocol, facilities and unprecedented welcome everywhere."

Elections 2024's importance: Pakistan has been an arch-rival to India, shares volatile borders with Iran and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, has a love-hate relationship with the USA and (still) is a close friend of China – and a nuclear-armed state. In 2022, the country's politicians jointly ousted Imran Khan, the last elected prime minister, and replaced his administration with a coalition government – called PDM. That coalition was replaced by an unelected caretaker government in August 2023, which should have held elections by November that year but delayed by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) till the Supreme Court of Pakistan's explicit orders to hold elections on 8th February 2024.

However, a quick look at the election results suggested lack of stability and solidity. ***After six years of exile in a luxury London flat – Nawaz Sharif was back. During the last two months - just in time for the 2024 election - he was cleared of all corruption charges and the lifetime ban through swift proceedings by the high-judiciary of Pakistan.*** Many speculated that the support he garnered was mainly from the military establishment; but Sharif had also a hunch and instinct that the army could turn his royal-table any time as happened to him in October 1999.

Imran Khan, 71, was not there on 2024's ballot; he was behind bars serving a sentence he and his supporters decried as ***'politically motivated and a conspiracy'***. His rise to power - and fall from grace - had both been attributed to the army, despite denials from both sides. His opponents in 2018 accused him of being their proxy, while his supporters alleged the army chief was behind his jailing.

Back in 2018, the PTI leader Mr Khan was portrayed as a ***'candidate of CHANGE'***, promising to end dynastic politics, ensure accountability of corrupt politicians, reform the judiciary and create jobs for young people as part of a revamped economy. But under his rule, the cost of living soared, many

of his political opponents were jailed but with no cogent results, media freedoms were curbed, zero attention was given to EDUCATION & LITERACY, industrialization and infra-structure development.

And yet, a Gallup poll [gallup.com.pk/post/35889], available on all media pages of 10th January 2024 - found ***Mr Khan was still the most popular politician nationally***, though Sharifs had closed the gap considerably in the previous six months. Meanwhile, with just a week to go until the vote, Pakistani courts handed down two more sentences to Khan, who was already serving three years.

There were significant concerns the PTI was not being given a fair chance to campaign. Many of its leaders were behind bars or had defected, its candidates were having to stand as independents and others were on the run. The party was also stripped of its cricket bat symbol, essential to help millions of illiterate voters choose where to mark their ballots.

The above said moves forced PTI-backed candidates, who were running as independents, to use other symbols instead, including calculators, bulbs, heaters and dice etc. Electoral symbols play a key role in a country where more than 40% were unable to read. Other tactics were also used to prevent their candidates from campaigning for and winning seats, including locking up PTI members and supporters and banning them from holding rallies, effectively forcing them underground or fleeing away from their home towns. Imran Khan was serving 14 years in prison, having been sentenced in three separate cases in the space of five days within the earlier week.

See the **BBC's assessment** of political positions BEFORE ELECTIONS-2024; its media analysis dated 5th February 2024 is referred:

"Many Pakistanis are frustrated that his [Mr Khan's] economic and anti-corruption pledges have rung hollow, but his popularity has not waned even from behind bars.

*A **Gallup opinion** poll in December showed his approval ratings stand at 57%, putting him narrowly ahead of rival Nawaz Sharif with 52% of the votes. A **Bloomberg survey** last month showed Khan to be the top pick among some Pakistani finance professionals to run the country's failing economy.*

Some citizens say Khan sparked a political awakening by portraying himself as a 'change candidate' who promised to end dynastic politics. (It was Imran Khan and his party who explained to a villager like me how two parties plundered the wealth of the nation. He taught us how to vote for change; said farmer Muhammad Hafeez, who lives in Nabipura, a village in Punjab)."

At just 35, **Bilawal Zardari** was the chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which came third at the last election; but it was as little surprise in a country where dynastic politicians are the norm, rather than the exception. The Oxford-educated son of former PM Benazir Bhutto - assassinated in 2007 - and former president Asif Ali Zardari, he served as foreign minister during the coalition [PDM] government which followed Imran Khan's ousting.

For elections 2024, Bilawal and his party produced a manifesto making a series of expensive pledges, like doubling wages, claiming the budget could be found through government cuts and subsidies for the wealthy. However, it was unlikely the party could win the chance to enact these policies; and political pundits had suggested it could end up a kingmaker in a governing alliance. Speaking to the BBC (*its analysis dated 31st January 2024 is referred*), he said he felt that a decision between the PMLN and PTI put him **'between the devil and the deep blue sea'**.

Much before elections 2024, **Tariq Khosa – a former Police Chief** wrote on media pages:

"In the current environment of spin and cynicism, the choice given to the people is simple: keep your head down and survive, or raise your head and challenge the atrocities and suffer the consequences.

The response must be a principled one: it should be refusal to be part of an immoral, devious regime and a commitment to bring a change through ballot, by being brave enough to reach the polling stations on Feb 8 and casting their votes. Then it would be the test of those who will count the votes. Will they defy the choice of the electorate or become part of a shameless legacy of yet another rigged election?"

– daily **DAWN** dated 3rd February 2024 is referred.

Pakistan is such an unfortunate nation that the western research / media institutions had categorically stated that February 2024's elections in Pakistan would NOT BE DIFFERENT than the earlier ones. See an analysis by Michael Kugelman which appeared in the **FOREIGN POLICY** Magazine of Washington on 7th February 2024 – just a day before the elections:

"Pakistan readies for elections that will follow the usual script. A top Pakistani political party [PTI] is subjected to a harsh crackdown ahead of national elections. Its members are harassed, abducted, and arrested. Media outlets are pressured not to cover any of the party's activities, and critics of this repression are silenced. The party's top leader is given a long jail sentence on the eve of the polls.

This was the situation for the PMLN in 2018. Today, the PMLN is contesting Pakistan's Feb. 8 elections with no problems, and it is former Prime Minister Imran Khan's PTI party that is receiving this treatment. Hundreds of PTI supporters have been arrested, the party's top leadership is hollowed out, and the already-imprisoned Khan received three new sentences within 10 days of Thursday's vote."

The PTI's plight was an especially intense manifestation of a long-running pattern in Pakistan: Somebody else used a range of tactics to shape the electoral environment in its own way. What happened in the lead-up to the 8th February elections was not new, but the backdrop it played out against some 'objectionable people' was unique. The country was facing a convergence of acute crises: economic stress so severe that the upper classes were also feeling the pinch, upsurges in terrorism, worsening border tensions, and dangerous levels of political polarization. After Mr Khan was arrested in May 2023 on corruption charges, protesters attacked military facilities, including Pak-Army's GHQ in Rawalpindi.

Rarely had political violence taken such direct aim at Pakistan's military, which had long held a sanctified status. The military dramatically ramped up its crackdown against the PTI; in turn, PTI's anger with the military surged, fueling a crisis of confidence that went deep: Some military officers had reportedly faced discipline proceedings for retaining support for Khan.

Social media has in part aggravated this anger and polarization leading into the elections. PTI supporters vented on online platforms, and some hardliners developed large followings by directing withering criticism at the military on social media. Many vocal PTI supporters turned to anonymous accounts, fearing retaliation by the state that had restricted internet access during the party's online campaign events. The outcome of the elections next day was unlikely to be stabilizing. Despite everything, Khan's PTI was rallying its supporters with ***get-out-the-vote calls*** and contesting elections with independents on the ballot.

That general elections could set the stage for a new crisis, both political and of economy—especially if PMLN's Nawaz Sharif, who had scuffled with the

Army during his previous terms as prime minister, returned to power. Sharif's relationship with the military was stressed and strained till that day. That day, he was back in the military's good graces: His experience likely made the military think he could stabilize the economy—and he was a bitter rival of Khan, too. *'Any fresh political tensions could distract policymakers from addressing critical social, economic, and security challenges, just as Khan's confrontation with the military did. For many Pakistanis, those elections could be the latest sequel of a movie they prefer not to watch';* above quoted **FOREIGN POLICY Magazine** is again referred.

IMRAN KHAN WON ELECTIONS-2024 BUT LOST POWER OPTIONS:

Pakistan's general elections were held on 8th February 2024, with widespread accusations of rigging and corruption, prompting opposition parties and observers within and beyond Pakistan to question the legitimacy of the official results. The unfolding of the electoral process dealt a significant blow to Pakistan's democratic journey, casting doubt on its commitment to upholding credible and legitimate democratic governance.

A research paper written at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute in the National University of Singapore (NUS) and placed on media pages on 11th April 2024 noted with concern that:

"More than a month after the general elections in Pakistan, the results have left more questions than answers. The allegations of rigging and 'mandate stealing', election-day violence and the delay in receiving the official poll results have called into question the reliability of the February 2024 elections and their outcome. Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and the Pakistan Muslim League-N led coalition are set to begin their new term at the outset of political and economic instability. Pakistan's economic challenges, including its heavy reliance on International Monetary Fund and its declining democratic values spotlight grave concerns over the country's future."

CONTROVERSIES AROUND IMRAN KHAN:

The election process was overshadowed by controversies around former prime minister, Imran Khan, and his party, the Pakistani Tehreek-e-Insaf

(PTI). Khan's imprisonment and the continued harassment of his party members deeply troubled many voters. Moreover, the PTI encountered significant obstacles as numerous nomination papers for its candidates mysteriously disappeared or were rejected. The PTI-backed candidates further encountered physical obstructions during the nomination submission process. Additionally, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) opted to ban the use of the cricket bat, the party's iconic symbol, forcing a majority of PTI's candidates to run as independents during the elections.

Elections-2024 apparently marked the triumphant return of Nawaz Sharif, who had been residing in exile in the United Kingdom since 2018. After years of leading the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PMLN) remotely, Nawaz made a powerful comeback, controversially seeing his court cases dismissed. Finally, in contemporary Pakistani politics, there has been a prevalent understanding that the army, *the 'establishment'*, mostly operated as the kingmaker in the country, still seen touching heights. Initially backing Khan, the army allegedly orchestrated his ouster following his critical remarks against the establishment.

The polls-2024 were marred by significant controversy, with widespread allegations of rigging favouring PMLN and its allies. International observers, including the United States (US), were critical of the conduct of the elections. By the late hours of election day, surprising both the establishment and their adversaries, the PTI-backed independent candidates were notably ahead of their main rival-parties.

However, the initial spark of hope for Khan and his supporters quickly faded as the opposition experienced a sudden resurgence in votes. This shift raised concerns of political manipulation, with results seemingly changing overnight in areas. Candidates, particularly PTI-backed independents, alleged tampering with voting figures (via Forms 45 & 47) to ensure their defeat. These claims found support from international observers, commentators, and Pakistani political figures including Maulana Fazlur Rehman of JJIF. Most media outlets and TV channels had openly criticized the electoral process for lacking transparency and accountability altogether.

Following the polls, widespread turmoil ensued, accompanied by authentic reports regarding power-sharing arrangements between two traditional rivals, PMLN and PPP. Gohar Ali Khan and the PTI-backed independents tried to assert they had enough seats for a majority; but practically it was not true. Tensions escalated when the Election Commissioner of Rawalpindi, Liaqat Ali Chatha, claimed his involvement in election result manipulation, implicating the Supreme Court and Chief Election Commissioner. The PTI initially supported his claim, but *Chatha later retracted*.

Amidst a haze of political maneuvering, it became evident that the coalition that the new government would be spearheaded by PMLN and Asif Ali Zardari. In the late hours of 13th February 2024, a breakthrough occurred as several prominent parties announced their intention to join the coalition government. Nawaz's PMLN emerged as the election winner, poised to lead a coalition that included the PPP, Muttahida Quami Movement [MQM], Pakistan Muslim League Quaid [PMLQ], Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party [IPP] and the Baluchistan Awami Party [BAP]. The PTI was made to sit on the opposition benches and it pledged to vigorously protest the election results in the near future.

Moreover, to have representation in parliament, the PTI members formed a coalition with the ***Sunni Ittehad Council*** (SIC), enabling them to qualify for the 60 reserved seats for women and religious minorities and making a last-ditch effort to form a government; however, their efforts were unsuccessful, as the *Supreme Court ruled the SIC had violated the requirements for the mandatory submission of the party list for reserved seats, thus making them ineligible to receive any seats from the quota.*

Initial reports of a power-sharing formula, with the Prime Minister's office alternating between the parties, were rejected by the PPP but a consensus on the new government's details was reached late on 20th February 2024. The president of PMLN, Shehbaz Sharif, confirmed meeting the required seat numbers with the PPP's support to form the next government.

On 4th March 2024, amidst weeks of rumours, allegations, protests and confusion, Shehbaz took oath as the prime minister of Pakistan, with his cabinet sworn in on 11th March 2024, which included notable figures from all parties; Zardari was elected Pakistan's president for the second time. On the provincial front, Ali Amin Gandapur of the PTI became Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sarfaraz Bugti of the PPP in Balochistan and Murad Ali Shah of the PPP in Sindh. In Punjab, Maryam Nawaz, daughter of Nawaz, made history as the first female chief minister. The PTI formed only one provincial government, and in the national assembly, Khan's prime ministerial candidate, Omar Ayub Khan, was named the leader of the opposition.

Leaving aside the then top issue of delaying the acquisition of funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), *another urgent concern for Pakistan was the increasingly vocal public dissatisfaction with the country's state of political affairs.* The army was facing significant criticism from the masses, with the recent elections demonstrating strong support for Khan and the PTI among the voters. Unofficially, Pakistan was operating as a deep state, where the security establishment appeared to hold greater influence than the civilian leadership. The 9th May 2022 riots marked the steadfast protests against

the army in country's history. Additionally, figures closely aligned with the establishment, such as the Sharifs, were also facing scrutiny regarding their loyalty and ability to govern justly. Nawaz's historically turbulent relationship with the army reflected dynamics of both benefiting from their support and enduring their authority.

*"Finally, according to the **Economist's Democracy Index 2023**, Pakistan experienced the greatest decline of any country in the region, dropping 11 places to 118th globally, with its score falling to 3.25. The index highlighted meddling in the electoral process, government dysfunction and severe curtailment of judicial independence. Moreover, Pakistan was the only Asian country downgraded from a **'hybrid regime to an authoritarian regime'**, with the army cited as the primary force behind Khan's downfall, intentionally hindering his party's day-to-day operations. Furthermore, the Freedom in the World Report of 2023 ranked Pakistan 35 out of 100, a slight decrease from 2022. Pakistan also dropped from 161st to 164th position in the United Nations (UN) Human Development Index, and on the UN's E-Government Development Index, it ranked at 150 of 193, with a ranking of 106 of 193 on the E-Participation Index, based on data collected in 2022."*

NUS's Research Paper, written by *Dr Imran Ahmed & Saad-ul-Haq*, published on world media pages dated 11th February 2024 is referred again.

Pakistan's 2024 general elections marked a crucial juncture in the country's history. Allegations of rigging and corruption had cast a shadow over the integrity of the electoral process, stirring doubt and controversy over their results. However, the polls also served to showcase the profound popular support garnered by Khan and his political party, the PTI. The electoral success of PTI-backed candidates demonstrated protest against the establishment's political machinations, a rejection of the army's political choices as well as a deep-seated disillusionment and frustration with the political landscape of Pakistan.

DEMOCRACY OR FAMILY AFFAIRS: **FOREIGN MEDIA OPINIONS**

[Referring to the **AP NEWS** dated 10th February 2024:

"Pakistani politics is a family affair. Maryam Nawaz Sharif is the daughter of ex-premier Nawaz Sharif. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's

mother is the assassinated premier Benazir Bhutto. Benazir's father was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, also a prime minister.

Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal increased their public visibility in recent years, him with his stint as foreign minister, and her taking on a greater role in party politics, especially during her father's four years of self-exile abroad in the UK to avoid prison sentences.

While Bilawal has been PPP's chairman since 2007 and is likely to be prime minister at some point because of his lineage, Maryam is being groomed for the top job and has been cast as heir of the PMLN, over her uncle Shehbaz and his son Hamza.

She accompanied her father at rallies, giving fiery and uncompromising speeches, and escorted him on polling day when he went to cast his vote. If she doesn't get a role in the cabinet, her father could slot her into the job of chief minister of Punjab province, seen as a stepping stone to the premiership.^{7]}

EU: Pakistani authorities should investigate election irregularities:

Referring to the **DUNYA NEWS** dated 9th February 2024 [at 23:26:54 PKT].

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said in a statement on Friday (9th Feb 24):

"In response to claims of election tampering in Pakistan, the European Union has urged the authorities to guarantee a prompt and comprehensive investigation of all documented irregularities in the elections and to execute the suggestions of the forthcoming EU Election Expert Mission report. The EU welcomes the increased number of women registered to vote compared to the last elections.

We regret the lack of a level-playing field due to the inability of some political actors to contest the elections, restrictions to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression both online and offline, restrictions of access to the internet, as well as allegations of severe interference in the electoral process, including arrests of political activists. We therefore call upon the relevant authorities to ensure a timely and full investigation of all reported election irregularities and to implement the recommendations of the upcoming EU Election Expert Mission report.

The participation by the Pakistani people to exercise their right to vote, despite systemic barriers still faced by women and persons belonging to minorities, demonstrates their commitment to democracy and the rule of law."

On 10th February 2024; there was much hue and cry in international media. While UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed concern about suspension of mobile communications services and violence in Pakistan on election day, the European Union and the US adopted cautious response with the former seeking investigation into irregularities - saying that ***'the State Department is looking forward to timely, complete election results that reflect the will of the Pakistani people'***.

UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said:

"It is important for all candidates and supporters to ensure that human rights and the rule of law are fully respected in the interest of the Pakistani people and (to) resolve any disputes that might arise through established legal procedures."

EU & US demand probe: In a statement on the general elections in Pakistan, the European Union [EU] said:

"We regret the lack of a level playing field due to the inability of some political actors to contest the elections, restrictions to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression both online and offline, restrictions of access to the internet, as well as allegations of severe interference in the electoral process, including arrests of political activists."

We therefore call upon the relevant authorities to ensure a timely and full investigation of all reported election irregularities and to implement the recommendations of the upcoming EU Election Expert Mission report."

The US State Department said:

"Millions of Pakistanis made their voices heard by voting in Pakistan's elections on February 8, with record numbers of Pakistani women, members of religious and ethnic minority groups, and youth registered. We now look forward to timely, complete results that reflect the will of the Pakistani people."

*We join credible international and local election observers in their assessment that these elections included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. **We condemn electoral violence, restrictions on the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including attacks on media workers, and restrictions on access to the Internet and telecommunication services, and are concerned about allegations of interference in the electoral process.***

Comments from UK: In a statement on Pakistan's elections, UK Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron's statement said:

"...we recognize, however, serious concerns raised about the fairness and lack of inclusivity of the elections. We regret that not all parties were formally permitted to contest the elections and that legal processes were used to prevent some political leaders from participation, and to prevent the use of recognizable party symbols.

We also note the restrictions imposed on internet access on polling day, significant delays to the reporting of results and claims of irregularities in the counting process."

International media, too, hinted towards the lack of credibility and rigging. THE ECONOMIST called the election "rigged", stating that '**confusion reigns in Pakistan's rigged election**'. Weekly TIME published an analysis with the title: "**Pakistan's elections are being brazenly rigged. Why doesn't the US seem to care?**", which summed up the chronological history of PTI after the 9th May riots and the expectations of the International Community from these elections.

Referring to the daily **DAWN** dated **1st March 2024**:

"33 US lawmakers, all Democrats like President Biden, in their joint letter, expressed concerns about pre- and post-poll rigging in Pakistan's parliamentary elections of 2024. They called for a transparent and credible investigation before recognizing a new Pakistani government, citing evidence of violations and disruptions on 8th February 2024 – the polling day.

The lawmakers brought attention to concerns about post-poll rigging, citing delays in reporting results, video evidence of abuses, and discrepancies in vote totals. They referenced reports by nonpartisan

observers, which highlighted the necessity of a transparent and credible audit process before acknowledging a new Pakistani government."

Members with influence in Michigan, and who signed the letter, were Rashida, Ilhan Omar, and Andre Carson. Pramila Jayapal, the chairperson of the Progressive Caucus and who often advocates for the Kashmir cause, has endorsed the letter. Additionally, Chair Emeritus Barbara Lee and Whip Greg Casar had also added their signatures.

The dispute centers around discrepancies between polling center results issued to candidates and the final constituency-wide tally. The lawmakers noted that respected election monitors, human rights organizations echoed these findings. They stressed the importance of a comprehensive investigation and adherence to democratic principles.

Referring to the **Reuters** observations published on media pages of **10th February 2024:**

"The United States, Britain and the European Union have separately expressed concerns about Pakistan's electoral process in the wake of a vote on Thursday and urged a probe into reported irregularities. The main battle was between former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's party and candidates backed by ex-prime minister Imran Khan. Both declared victory separately.

The US and the EU both mentioned allegations of interference, including arrests of activists; claims of irregularities, interference and fraud should be fully investigated.

Imran is in jail and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party has been barred from the polls. Independents, most of them backed by the PTI founder, had won the most seats — 98 of the 245 until early hours of the day — while Nawaz's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party had won 69 seats."

The EU statement noted a lack of a level playing field, attributing that to the inability of some political actors to contest the elections and to restrictions to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and internet access. The US State Department said there were **"undue restrictions"** on freedoms of expressions and assembly while noting violence and attacks on media workers. Both Khanna and Omar urged the State Department not to recognize a winner until investigations are conducted into allegations of misconduct.

- **Michael Kugelman**, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center think tank in Washington, said both EU and US State Department statements were ***"relatively mild ... considering the great scale of the rigging that went down."***

Earlier that week, the UN human rights office denounced violence against political parties and candidates. It voiced concern over the "*pattern of harassment, arrests and prolonged detentions of leaders and supporters*" of Khan's party. Great Britain's David Cameron's statement noted ***"serious concerns raised about the fairness and lack of inclusivity of the elections."***

MORE OBSERVATIONS OF FOREIGN MEDIA:

Referring to the **theintercept.com** by **Ryan Gim** on 12th Feb 2024:

On Election Day Thursday, polling locations were randomly changed and the internet and cell service was taken down. Western media described the race was over, a fait accompli for the blue-eyed candidate Nawaz Sharif. And yet....

"And yet. Pakistani voters came out in such historic numbers that it caught the think-tanks off guard.... they were swamped by the tsunami they didn't see coming.... they had allowed individual polling locations to release official vote tallies, which parties and TV broadcasters could then total up themselves....According to those broadcasts, watched by millions of people, PTI (or 'independents') candidates had won 137 seats by official counts, well on their way to a majority (there are 342 seats in the National Assembly; 266 are filled by direct elections). There were another 24 seats Opens in a new tab where 90 percent of the vote was counted and PTI was ahead. It was a clear landslide....

Then the people saw shutting down the ECP's website and halting the count; police forces surged into polling locations. Fantastical numbers began to be announced, sometimes just reversing the totals so the winner became the loser. The top state-managers were clearly unprepared to steal such a resounding victory, and the obviousness of the fraud forced politicians in the UK and US, including even the State Department, to denounce it."

*All of this put the US State Department in a difficult position. It's widely known the **US was no fan of Imran Khan**. The US prefers to work directly with the Pakistan military as a check against China. Khan has long said he wants a better relationship with the US, yet we refused to believe him – **our preferred approach was to oust him, put in more pliant clients.***

On Thursday afternoon at the State Department, told spokesperson Vedant Patel, that if PTI candidates won the election, they would be coerced into changing parties - would the US recognize such a government? One winning candidate, Waseem Qadir, had already flipped. Elected to the national assembly as a PTI-affiliated independent, he claimed he was abducted and was then supporting Nawaz Sharif's party. Skeptics believed he was actually bribed, not tortured - but either way, neither scenario was remotely democratic.

Similar was the story for police raiding the Sialkot home of Usman Dar. At the time, Dar was an opposition candidate representing Khan's PTI; a video showed Pakistani police officials assaulting Dar's elderly mother, Rehana Dar, in her bedroom. Dar's brother, Umar Dar, was also picked up. Rehana Dar was a political beginner, an angry mother who represented the country's frustration with its ruling elite....Nevertheless, she persisted. On Thursday night, election night, with her son Umar still in custody, she shocked the country. With 99 percent of precincts counted, she had beaten that lifetime politician, Khawaja Asif, with 131,615 to 82,615 votes.

- ***Then came one more twist — one that many in Pakistan expected, but which was still shocking. When the full results were announced, Dar's total had been reduced by 31,434 votes, while Asif gained votes, and he was declared the winner.*** Across the country, similar reversals are flowing out from Pakistan's election commission.

But in several key races, results had suddenly swung toward the PMLN allegedly - after hours of unexplained delays. In the NA-128 constituency, where the PTI-backed candidate was senior lawyer Salman Akram Raja, Raja was leading with 100,000 votes in 1,310 out of 1,320 polling stations. On Friday, he was trailing by 13,522 votes. He took the case to high court, which granted him a stay and stopped the ECP from announcing the winner pending further investigation. Following his lead, multiple PTI candidates had announced that they would take their cases to court – how simple were those losers – ***'the COURTS were not encouraged to hear such flimsy petitions those days'.***

Returning Officer (RO) from NA 130 from where NS was declared winner against Dr. Yasmin Rashid - was sent on medical leave same day.

See **the TELEGRAPH** dated 9th February 2024:

"Provisional results revealed high turnout for Mr Khan's candidates, even though the former premier and his wife, Bushra Bibi, have been sentenced to seven years in prison after a district court ruled their 2018 marriage violated the law. It was the third sentence for Khan and the second for his wife this week. Mr Khan claimed victory in a video message created using artificial intelligence. The jailed former prime minister rejected his rival Nawaz Sharif's earlier claim to victory, calling on his supporters to celebrate."

Mr Sharif on 9th February 2024 night admitted his party had been unable to secure an outright majority and said he would enter coalition talks with other parties. David Cameron said there were serious concerns about the fairness of the elections. 'We regret that not all parties were formally permitted to contest the elections and that legal processes were used to prevent some political leaders from participation, and to prevent the use of recognisable party symbols - that Britain also noted restrictions imposed on internet access on polling day'.

The US called for an investigation into allegations of electoral fraud:

"We join credible international and local election observers in their assessment that these elections included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. We condemn electoral violence... and are concerned about allegations of interference in the electoral process. Claims of interference or fraud should be fully investigated."

'Even if the PTI was unable to form a government, the elections showed there were limits to political engineering,' said Bilal Gilani, executive director of **Gallup Pakistan**.

The TELEGRAPH said further that early incomplete results after polling closed on Thursday evening hinted at strong PTI support. Results slowed to a trickle overnight, leading to accusations the counting process was being slowed so that results could be manipulated; results in as many as 50 constituencies had been changed after PTI's strong showing became clear. The authorities backing Mr Sharif had underestimated public support for Mr Khan; they have been misreading it again and again and again. They misread Khan's resolve, his resilience and his determination - misread the popularity

of Khan. They (the government & the ECP) were constantly saying the people would not be coming out – (in fact) they were waiting for the day when they were able to step out and cast their votes and they did it and that was a major surprise to them.

However, the political turmoil left the country poorly placed to make reforms needed to deal with a severe economic crisis and sharp inflation. Another thinking was also prevailing then that Mr Khan's popularity was likely to have been in part a protest at the PMLN's economic mismanagement – Election Day had spelt what needed for Pakistan next.

KHAN RISES AGAIN IN PAKISTAN (?)

Mr. Khan's success was fueled by social media, which drove Pakistan's young people to turn out to vote and rebuff the country's powerful military.

When Pakistan's government censored the media, former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party posted campaign videos on TikTok. When the police barred his supporters from holding rallies, they hosted virtual gatherings online. And when Mr. Khan ended up behind bars, his supporters relayed speeches using artificial intelligence techniques. Mr. Khan's message resonated with millions across the country who were frustrated by the country's economic crisis and old political dynasties: ***'Pakistan has been on a steep decline for decades, he explained, and only he could restore its former greatness.'***

Referring to ***Christina Goldbaum*** (Bureau Chief of THE TIME in Afghanistan & Pakistan)'s analysis appeared in the **NEW YORK TIMES** dated 12th February 2024:

"The success of candidates aligned with Mr. Khan's party in last week's election — snagging more seats than any other in Parliament — was a stunning upset in Pakistani politics. Since Mr. Khan fell out with the country's generals and was ousted by Parliament in 2022, his supporters had faced a military-led crackdown that experts said was designed to sideline the former prime minister.

His success marked the first time in Pakistan's recent history that the political strategy used by the country's powerful military for decades to keep its grip on power had suddenly veered, off course. It also proved how Mr. Khan's populist rhetoric and the country's internet-savvy youth bulge are rewriting politics in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed

nation of 240 million people that has struggled with military coups since its founding 76 years ago."

However, the media intelligentsia held that it would be the first time in Pakistan's history that a civilian government, if at all succeeded by the PTI, would be led by a party at odds with the military and whose leader is behind bars. No matter the outcome, Mr. Khan's PTI ***'proved it is an unshakable political presence, tapping into the dissatisfaction of Pakistan's youth. The old playbook for shaping the country's politics is outdated; social media and youth mobilization have become game changers.'***

PMLN's, and off course joined by many like PPP and JUI(F)'s Fazalur Rehman, military-aligned leaders built political parties around their family dynasties, passing party leadership from one generation to another — and keeping political power within a tightknit circle.

But in recent years, as the country's young population ballooned to around half its electorate, there was a growing frustration with that system. Young people felt shut out of Pakistan's political system because ***someone in the family will always get the top slot***. The old parties had gone obsolete because they refused to change — and that created a vacuum for someone like Imran Khan; the results of elections-2024 were the witness.

No doubt, Mr Khan initially rose to political prominence with the military's help in July 2018 but after his ouster in April 2022 he capitalized on young people's yearning for change to strengthen his political base independent of the Army-Generals. His party, the PTI, produced political campaigns on social media — outside the reach of state censorship — that young people said stirred a political awakening for the youngster lots.

In viral videos, Mr. Khan railed against the country's key-Generals, whom he had blamed for his ouster in 2022. He described how the military operated like a ***'deep state governing politics from behind the scenes'***, and claimed that the United States had colluded with Pakistani officials on his removal from power. See the public opinion in that regard:

*"I'm voting for change. I'm fed up with this whole system of political parties that have been running the country. They've put Imran Khan in jail — that's the main issue — it shows it's all been managed by the establishment - referring to the military;"*the **NYT** of above date is again referred.

But even after his ouster, the country's military leaders appeared to underestimate the country's shifting political sands. As Mr. Khan made a political

comeback, some military Generals turned to their old playbook to sideline him – but couldn't succeed.

Authorities slapped Mr. Khan with dozens of charges that resulted in four separate sentences totaling 34 years in prison. They arrested hundreds of his supporters and — for the first time — cast a much wider net, going after Pakistanis in the country's elite, even those with close ties to the military itself. However, that **intimidation campaign** appeared to only bolster support for Mr. Khan.

Because the crackdown was publicized widely on social media, it exposed and turned more of the public against the military's heavy hand in politics. Many people who cast ballots last week for Mr. Khan's party said they did so simply to malice some Generals for allegedly backing exhaustive tampering with vote counts and the promises by Mr. Khan's party of long, bruising court battles to challenge dozens of results it says the military rigged. The PTI leadership held that ***"PTI is a peaceful party that has ushered in a revolution through the ballot. We will not allow our struggle to be hijacked by nefarious designs."***

The political showdown pushed the country on edge. Most agreed that despite the election's results showing just how many Pakistanis were rejecting the country's broken political system. Bilal Gilani, the executive director of Gallup Pakistan, said:

"Even if the balance of power is tilting in favor of the political parties, will they actually act democratic themselves? Or will they become more fascist in their ideologies? Will they exclude the people who haven't voted for them? That's the question now."

Here, ***Dawn.com*** looks at some of the reporting and analysis from across the globe on the elections that were, contrary to the pre-poll predictions, anything but predictable. From the pre-poll phase to Election Day irregularities to the post-poll counting process — the attempts to subvert the PTI that were blatantly executed - NOT gone unnoticed; ***Dawn.com*** Published on **11th February 2024** is referred:

"You might be wondering why it has taken us a couple of days to talk about Pakistan politics and Pakistani elections, one of our favourite subjects; that's because one, the situation has been fast-moving and second, the situation has been much too cluttered also for me to hold forth on it..."

[The Print's Editor-in-chief Shekhar Gupta - views in *Cut the Clutter episode*** 48 hours after the general elections]**

The Guardian — the Observer view on Pakistan voters' rejection of military rule: a victory for democracy

"Attempts to ignore Khan and his supporters may trigger further unrest and instability. That is the opposite of what the country needs. At a time in history when the integrity of democracy in India and Bangladesh also faces serious questions, Pakistanis should take a moment to celebrate the voter revolt of 2024."

Bloomberg — Imran Khan's candidates defy odds to thrive in Pakistan election

"The independents' strong performance points to Khan's enduring popularity among the nation's 129 million registered voters, many of whom are struggling to make ends meet amid the fastest inflation in Asia. It also highlights public disillusionment with the status quo of Pakistani politics, represented by the parties of the Sharif and Bhutto clans."

The New York Times — Shocking opposition victory throws Pakistan into chaos

"The success of Mr Khan's party upended the decades-old political playbook governing Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation of 240 million. Throughout those years, the military has wielded ultimate authority, guiding its politics behind a veil of secrecy, and civilian leaders have typically risen to power only with its support — or been driven from office by its heavy hand."

The Independent — Pakistan election credibility already marred by internet blackout and slow count amid anxious wait for results

"But whoever ends up winning the election, the way it was conducted will guarantee recriminations over the validity of the result, and serves as a bleak reminder of the power still held by the country's military establishment to try and interfere with its democratic processes."

Sky News — Pakistan is in political limbo after election upset - so what's next?

"To me, the PPP's Bilawal Bhutto Zardari could well be the king-maker. His centrist party will need to decide if it's the status quo of

Sharif they want to get behind or the more radical agenda of the independents. What is clear is the military has taken a hit this election. For the first time ever, they appeared to back a candidate at odds with the political winds of the rest of the country."

Time Magazine — Pakistan's military used every trick to sideline Imran Khan—and failed. Now what?

"[...] the question remains how PTI supporters will react to their disenfranchisement, not least given the grim state of the economy. On May 9, PTI supporters ransacked military premises in response to an earlier, fleeting arrest of Khan. He may remain behind bars, but Thursday's election shows the sporting icon is far from done as a political force."

France 24 — The 'generals' elections' in Pakistan that turned against the military

"The country's real power-wielder, however, was not on the ballot paper, and Pakistanis were never given a symbol or say on the issue. The 2024 general election was dubbed the most rigged in Pakistan's history, with wags on social media calling it the 'generals' election', referring to the all-powerful military in the nuclear-armed South Asian nation."

India Today — Jailed Imran Khan steals the show, time for Army to introspect?

"While hobnobbing and cobbling up an alliance to suit the establishment must already be underway, any government by 'selection' is not acceptable anymore to the people of Pakistan. Should the government formation look different from the mandate of the people, expect chaos in the streets of Pakistan."

CNBC — Pakistan's ex-PM Nawaz Sharif declares victory in fraught election as opponents claim vote-rigging

"The election, voting for which began the morning of Feb 8, comes at an especially turbulent time for the country of 240 million. Known for its decades of volatile politics involving assassinations, imprisonments and military coups, Pakistan is now in the throes of an economic crisis and its largest party has been banned from running in the election."

Financial Times — Imran Khan loyalists win shock victory in Pakistan election

"Many voters, particularly young people swept up by Khan's promises for a 'new Pakistan', were dismayed by the thought of another term under the Sharif dynasty — Nawaz's brother Shehbaz served as prime minister last year."

CBC News — Imran Khan's party defied the odds in Pakistan election with strong showing

"A stock response after an election, according to Hasan Askari Rizvi, a Lahore-based military analyst who wrote a book about the army's role in Pakistani politics. He said the open question is whether the country's military, used to being the ultimate authority in Pakistan, is willing to accept the message that was sent from the electorate, who came out in large numbers to cast their ballots for Khan."