

Corridors of uncertainty

Examining Pakistan's political landscape

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A relative of the late Benazir Bhutto, Yasir Bhutto is a worker for Imran Khan's Movement for Justice Party (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf or PTI, founded in 1996). Days before Pakistan's general election, he helped to organize a corner meeting – a gathering of political workers and senior party office-holders – in a village in Sindh's Larkana district. This did not sit well with some.

Riding alone on his motorbike in the shadow of the Naudero Sugar Mills, Yasir noticed an SUV following him. The driver played a game of cat-and-mouse with him before firing three bullets from behind its tinted windows. In the run-up to the previous general election, Yasir and his brother had been attacked, he told me, by members of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), but the police had done nothing. This is the reality in rural Sindh, where the PPP has been in power for a decade.

As the outcome of the historic July 25 polls sinks in amid a mixture of celebration and scepticism, Imran Khan is in the process of forming a coalition government. The Oxford-educated cricketer turned politician's long hard climb up the political ladder began more than two decades ago. For many, he stands apart from the same old corrupt faces that take turns in the seat of power. Yasir, meanwhile, is lucky to be alive. He is happy that his party won the highest number of seats in the country's National Assembly, but it will make little difference to life at the local level in Sindh. The PPP has once again secured a sweeping majority in the provincial legislature. As a journalist based in Karachi, I contacted Yasir in the weeks before the 2018 election. It was during our correspondence that I learnt of the recent attack on him.

Democracy comes at a high price in Pakistan. The recent election alone cost more than 200 lives. They were lost in deadly attacks on corner meetings, convoys and a polling station, for which Islamic State and the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility. Nevertheless, there is a sense of relief that the incoming prime minister does not have a criminal record – a rarity in Pakistan. Even detractors churning out op-eds for the international press fall short of suggesting an alternative to him. And while he has been criticized for taking on board the same "electables" who previously plagued other parties, many still have faith in some of the faces that flank the chairman. These include Asad Umar, a former CEO of Engro Corporation (a Pakistani multinational company), believed to be the incoming finance minister, and Shafqat Mahmood, a former civil servant and senator.

Khan's televised victory speech, delivered from his residence in the hills above Islamabad, won him praise. In an unprecedented move, he promised that his administration would distance itself from the luxuries provided to government servants at state expense. The Prime Minister's House in Islamabad, for instance, is to be turned into an educational institution. He extended an olive branch to India (though the words, when translated into

English, sound like a warning: "If you take one step towards us, we will take two steps towards you"). This is in stark contrast to the former military dictator Pervez Musharraf's warning – "Lay off!" – in his inaugural address in 1999. Khan is known for his anti-American rhetoric and staunch criticism of the "War on Terror", but in his victory speech he expressed the hope of establishing a "mutually beneficial relationship" with the United States and "open borders" with Afghanistan.

Journalists, activists and politicians have accused Pakistan's army of manipulating the election. It is alleged that the military establishment, which has in the past nurtured the rise (and fall) of leaders such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, has installed Khan at the helm of the country. While the narrative is relatively muted in the country's traditional media, it plays at a deafening pitch on social media, where paranoia and sensationalism tend to creep in. When the PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's convoy was pelted with stones in the party's traditional stronghold of Lyari, for example, many believed that the protest was "orchestrated", that locals couldn't possibly be frustrated by ten years of PPP rule. This was put to rest when the PPP – Bilawal in tow – lost the election in Lyari for the first time in the party's history, and by a wide margin.

While allegations of electoral engineering by the establishment occupy the collective imagination, little attention is paid to evidence of slip-ups by the country's "democratic" forces. Reports of ballot-tampering in favour of the PPP surfaced in districts across Sindh. Meanwhile, ballots stamped in favour of the party were discovered in a rubbish dump in Karachi. This was despite assurances of a level playing field provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the caretaker government.

Rahmat Bhutto, a reporter based in Larkana district of Sindh, noticed that the queues outside polling stations in his area consisted mostly of members of the working class. "I saw more women and young adults coming out to vote in this election", he told me. According to an election law passed by the ECP, women had to cast at least 10 per cent of the total vote in a constituency or else the result would be declared void. A large section of the middle class in the district, he noticed, had not come out to vote. Data provided by the Free and Fair Election Network Pakistan (FAFEN) reveals that almost half the country did not vote. According to Rahmat, the venues of some polling stations were changed at the last minute, without any notification being issued to the residents of those neighbourhoods. As a result, some families were unable to vote.

Dilawer Dahraj, who was on duty as a senior assistant presiding officer at a polling station in Karachi's NA-247 constituency, told me that while the voting process was free and fair, confusion was caused by "mismanagement"

on the part of the ECP and the polling staff. One of the final tasks at a polling station is the filling out of Form 45, which provides a summary of the results. The forms provided had a limited number of rows, however, and could not accommodate the names of all the candidates. As a result, extra copies had to be arranged and ad hoc measures taken. This led to delays. The camp of the returning officer was "like a war zone", according to Dilawer. He was stuck there until 4 am the following morning. It was only after the military intervened that any semblance of order was restored.

Around midnight, the software used to transfer the final vote count from polling sta-



Supporters of Imran Khan during his election campaign in Karachi, July 22

tions to the relevant authorities via smartphone stalled because it could not handle the data load. This failure of the results transmission system led to massive delays, with some results taking more than twenty-four hours to surface, fuelling suspicions of foul play.

Dilawer was also on duty as a member of polling staff in the 2013 election. He did not notice any difference – for better or worse – compared with his last experience, and certainly no improvement in the way the election was organized and run. Conditions in Larkana district, according to Rahmat, were far more stable than those in 2013, when party workers resorted to violence. The safer environment can be attributed to the presence of the army both inside and outside polling stations.

One thing that could not be curbed, however, was the money thrown around by various candidates in Sindh. Some parties conducted surveys in constituencies to gauge voter sentiment. Their candidates then proceeded to win over disgruntled supporters by distributing funds to them. The European Union Election

Observation Mission in Pakistan noted in its preliminary statement, published on July 27, that "the campaign was often dominated by candidates with large political appeal and financial means", and that "uneven rules on campaign spending further undermined candidates' equal opportunity to campaign".

The country-wide outcome of the election shows that a majority of the people voted for change. The PTI's sweeping victory in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is a reflection of the gradual disappearance of tribal society and dynastic politics in that province. The new generation of voters in KP, numbering over 3 million, enabled the PTI to secure a majority in the provincial assembly. In the previous election, the party had only garnered enough votes to form a coalition. Despite allegations of corruption against former chief minister Pervez Khattak, the last PTI-led coalition government had brought about improvements in health, education and policing services in KP.

According to the veteran journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai, the PTI vote was a symbol of protest against the old order. Parties such as the PPP and the Awami National Party offered old faces and old ideas. They had failed to deliver. Even in Sindh, where the PPP has maintained its grip on power owing to a lack of a formidable challenger, cracks are visible in the status quo. In Larkana – the home turf of the Bhuttos – where the PPP is usually guaranteed a victory, the party lost a provincial assembly seat. The PTI has emerged as the second-largest force in the Sindh Assembly.

History, however, tends to repeat itself. When the PPP first appeared on the political scene in 1967, it gained little or no support in Sindh. The party developed a power base in Punjab and on the strength of that rose to national prominence. Members of the party's founding coterie recall being shunned in the early days by influential landowners and political bigwigs in Sindh and being pelted with stones while campaigning in the province. It was only after the party formed the government at the centre that politicians from Sindh began to flock to it. Imran Khan and the PTI seem to be heading towards a similar fate.

For now, however, despite emerging victorious, Khan walks a tightrope. His effectiveness as prime minister will depend on his willingness and ability to appease the opposition in the coalition government. The losing parties have collectively rejected his mandate and are waiting in the wings to see him falter.

On the foreign policy front, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's offer of developing a "progressive relationship" with Pakistan marks an improvement from the days of the Sharif premiership and an encouraging turn in relations between the two neighbours. Yet it is hard to say whether it will spell an end to Indian sabre-rattling. Khan's past record of taking a soft stance against the Taliban has not won him friends among the NATO states. How future relations pan out, particularly in the context of an "open border" policy with Afghanistan, remains to be seen.