

ISAS Brief

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Pakistan Goes to Polls: Imran Khan's Tumble and the Youth Surge

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The unexpected has happened as Pakistan prepares to hold the next general election on 11 May 2013. Early in the evening of 7 May, Imran Khan, the rising star in Pakistani politics, suffered a fall in Gulberg, Lahore, a high-income constituency in the capital of the country's Punjab province. He fell while being lifted by a forklift on to a speaking platform. First carried on people's arms to his Sports Utility Vehicle and then transferred to an ambulance, Khan was eventually taken to Shaukat Khanum Hospital. He was attended there by a team of senior doctors. They used CT scans and X-Rays to determine the extent of injuries he had suffered. He did not have fractures in his skull but one of his vertebrae was damaged.

He was advised that any physical activity for several weeks would not be possible. His political rivals sent messages of sympathy and offered prayers for his full and rapid recovery. President Asif Ali Zardari sent flowers to his bedside. Mian Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League

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(Nawaz), or PML(N), suspended his campaign for a day. The hospital where Khan was treated and kept under observation was built by him in honour of his mother, Shaukat Khanum, who had died of cancer at an early age. It offers free care to the poor and stands as a symbol of a politician's commitment to citizens' welfare. The hospital is now seen once again as a reminder to the country's youth of what this leader could do for them if they were to hand him the reins of power in the elections on 11 May.

A Political Force

His injuries sent a shock wave through the ranks of his supporters – mostly young people who had turned this 60-year-old hero of the cricket world into a forceful politician. His associates announced that all his planned political engagements in the city of Lahore had been cancelled. It is unlikely that he will hit the campaign trail again before the election. Only time will tell how this accident will affect the elections results. There could be a sympathy vote, with more people than originally expected going to the polls now. We will know for sure what the impact of Imran Khan's tumble from the speaker's platform was, after the elections are held and detailed data are made available by the Election Commission.

The electoral mood seemed to be moving in his direction when the accident happened. The author's discussions with several senior leaders of the traditional parties showed their anxiety. Imran Khan's hectic pre-election campaigning and the response he was getting were unsettling the established parties. While the first-past-the-post electoral system might still win them many seats in the national and provincial assemblies, they were no longer sure how the youth would react if the election results did not reflect the enthusiasm they had for their man, Imran Khan, and his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The experience of 1977 was not forgotten when a massive victory by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) brought people out onto the streets. The people had expected a close result. Bhutto was removed from office and the military took over power. By now, the Pakistani youth has also seen the power of the street in the Arab Spring of 2011 and are not likely to let an opportunity they see for bringing about change simply slip.

Pakistan will now be electing 272 Members of the National Assembly and numerous others as members of the four provincial assemblies. The exact turn-out will be known after the results are tabulated and released by the Election Commission. Given the enormous interest generated by the latest national and provincial polls, it is expected that the turn-out will be higher than that in 2008, the last time a general election was held. It is also expected that there will be a larger proportion of young voters casting ballot this time. Many of them will be voting for the first time and their preferences will have a significant impact on the result.

Pakistan, with 190 million people, has one of the youngest populations among all countries. The median age is only 22 years which means that 95 million people are below that age. Slightly more than 60 per cent of Pakistan's population is below the age of 30 years. A significant number of them will be voting for the first time. It is the electorate's relative youth that makes the 2013 election particularly significant not only for Pakistan but for other countries in the Muslim world. All these countries have young populations and their political activism will change the political landscape of this part of the world. This will occur because of the political, economic and social preferences of these cohorts. What does the youth want to result from the latest elections in Pakistan?

A Youth Agenda for Change

It is clear from the way the young have participated in the preparations for the elections that they have several clear preferences. They want a government that is answerable not only to the elected parliament but also under a system of accountability that would ensure high-quality of governance. While aware of the fact that 'petty corruption' is entrenched in the Pakistani economic and social systems, they wish to see an end to 'rent-seeking' at high levels. They want Pakistan to pull back from the edge of economic abyss at which it has been standing for the last several years. They want the country's economy to match the growth rates of other South Asian states. They want the government to attend to the basic needs of the people. They want to bring such disaffected regions as Baluchistan and south Punjab into the mainstream of Pakistani politics and economics. They want the military out of politics. Most of them want a clear separation between religion and the affairs of the state. And they want the country to fashion its external relations in a way that suits its interests rather than those of the world's large powers.

How has the country's electorate arrived at this stage in the evolution of its thinking on economic, political and social issues? The May 2013 elections constitute a major step forward for the evolution of Pakistan's political order. It has firmly established a party-based political system in which the three mainstream organisations will have national rather than regional presence. The Pakistan People's Party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf may have strong provincial roots or roots in newly-politicised groups – the PPP in rural Sindh, the PML(N) in urban Punjab, the PTI among the youth in the urban areas across the country. But these three parties have assiduously attempted to create a national presence for themselves. This will make it easier to make national economic and social policies.

The strong challenge from the Islamic extremist groups has cost hundreds of people their lives but these groups have not succeeded either in disturbing the political process or in convincing a large segment of the population that liberal democracy is not meant for a country such as

Pakistan. A large turn-out of voters on 11 May will confirm the belief of the vast segment of the population that participatory democracy is the only way forward.

It is the political activism of the youth that encouraged – perhaps even forced – the main political parties to lay out in some detail as to how they will govern if they are given the reins of power by the people. Such detailed manifesto-making is a new development in Pakistan’s still under-developed political culture. What can be an even greater departure from the norm are the signs that the people – in particular those operating outside the assemblies – will hold the parties responsible for the promises they have made to get the people’s vote. It has been argued by many that what counts in Pakistan are links with members of the communities to which the candidates belong. This makes the elected representatives highly focused on very narrow community interests. The May 2013 elections are likely to break away from that tradition; and starting with the more developed parts of the country, the performance of parties will begin to mean more than community (*baradri*) alliances.

The youth surge will ensure that the governments that take power at the federal level as well as in the provinces (after the current election) pay attention to the areas that are of real concern to the younger activists. The pressure from the youth will also alter Pakistan’s external orientation. An insecure generation or two of leaders sought security from a deep association with the United States. This move was led by military men who wanted to build the armed forces to balance rival India’s continuously increasing strength. Moving in that direction, they had turned their back on South Asia and its regional history and culture. Another group of leaders had gone to Saudi Arabia to cleanse the Pakistani Islam by adopting the one practiced in some parts of the Arab world. *Salafism* was to replace *Sufism*. Imran Khan has argued against both moves and promised to build a “*naya*” (new) Pakistan on the country’s own soil.

Regardless of whether the latest elections will give Khan a prominent seat at the policymaking table, the youth surge he has catalysed will bring about fundamental changes. The centre of gravity in the political system has moved from the old-and-tried to the young-and-the-aspiring. Imran Khan’s tumble will only add to the pace of change.

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