



BULLETIN

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Elections in Pakistan and the International Consequences

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The parliamentary elections in Pakistan on 11 May, together with changes of army chief and chief justice later this year, open a potentially risky transition that can, however, strengthen democracy in the country. Although the next government is unlikely to bring fundamental changes to Pakistan's foreign policy, empowering civilian leadership over the army may lead in the long term to improved cooperation with neighbours and stabilisation in the region. The EU can play an important role in supporting peaceful changes through its Election Observation Mission and close engagement with the next government.

Regional Context. The Pakistan elections will be closely watched in regional and NATO capitals as the country is a crucial player for a successful transition in Afghanistan after ISAF troops withdraw by 2014. The major forces fighting Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's government and international forces, including Afghan Taliban (Queta Shura) and the Haqqani Network, are allegedly based in Pakistan, which thus may be able to influence peace talks. Last year, the outgoing government managed to rebuild tense relations with Afghanistan through exchanges of high-level political and military visits and by releasing dozens of mid-level Taliban fighters from prisons; however, tensions remain (i.e., border clashes between troops), and the future intentions of the Pakistani establishment towards a post-2014 Afghanistan is still unclear. Even if civilian leadership offers assurances of its full support for the Afghan-led peace process, it is not certain whether this position is shared by the army, which traditionally controls defence, security and foreign policy, and which may seek rather the emergence of a new pro-Pakistan government in Kabul. In this context, the upcoming elections and future of civil-military relations will have an important impact not only on the future of Pakistan but also on the whole region.

Historic Elections. After restoring democracy in Pakistan in 2008, the democratically elected parliament and government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) completed their full five-year terms on 16 February for the first time in the country's history. The elections to the 342-seat National Assembly and four provincial assemblies are scheduled for 11 May, and are overseen by a caretaker government led by retired judge Mir Hazar Khan Khoso and the independent Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP).

The main contenders in the election include the PPP led by President Asif Zardari, the opposition Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Justice Party) led by former cricket star Imran Khan. Former President Pervez Musharraf, who had returned to the country after four years of exile, was eventually disqualified from running in the elections and eventually arrested and charged with previous violations of the constitution. The main religious parties (such as Jamaat Ulema Pakistan and Jamaat-e-Islami) will participate in the election this time but traditionally do not do well at the polling boxes. A large proportion of young voters (almost half of the 84 million registered voters are aged under 35 and 20%, or 16.2 million, are between 18 and 25) may suggest some surprises in favour of charismatic Imran Khan, but the current electoral system (first-past-the-post) and traditional voting patterns that follow lines of regional identity, kinship and patronage, favour the two major parties, PML-N and PPP, which have strong bases in the largest provinces of Punjab and Sindh, respectively.

Although foreign relations do show up in election programs, the campaign concentrates on domestic issues such as failures of the incumbent establishment and plans to strengthen the economy, improve security, fight corruption and

tackle electricity shortages. PML-N, the most likely winner of the election, stresses in its manifesto that it intends to strengthen relations with China and normalise relations with its estranged neighbours, India and Afghanistan, in order to benefit from Pakistan's strategic location while calling for political, not military solutions to end conflicts with internal extremists. Although Khan appears to be more anti-American, criticising the U.S. drone campaign and calling for a re-evaluation of relations with Washington, at the same time he vows to improve relations with India and Afghanistan. The incumbent PPP has already made progress in the normalisation of relations with the U.S., India, and Afghanistan, and in strengthening engagement with the EU. A lack of fundamental differences in the programmes of the major parties and stable strategic circumstances suggest that regardless of who eventually wins, any dramatic changes in Pakistan's foreign policy seem unlikely. The major risks to the country come from the challenge of organising peaceful and credible voting and from the potential for an unexpected, higher vote for the religious parties that could join the next government.

Risks and Opportunities. The election will take place at a critical moment for Pakistan as violence inside the country is on the rise again, the economy is in dire straits, and the whole top leadership of the country will be replaced by year's end.

Security challenges entail not only terrorist attacks from extremist Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) but also a renewed insurgency in Baluchistan and an intensification of violence against Shia Muslims and Christian minorities across the country. There were more than 3,000 civilian casualties of terrorist violence reported in Pakistan in 2012—the highest number since the “War on Terror” started—and already in the first three months of 2013, about 1,000 people have lost their lives. The TTP wants to derail the election or at least impact its results by targeting the candidates and rallies of the main secular parties, and vows more attacks on election day.

The economy is another challenge. Although Pakistan's GDP growth stood at 4.2% in 2012, structural problems (weak industrial base, low quality of education, recurrent energy problems) remain unresolved. Deteriorating law and order and tensions in relations with the U.S. have further made foreign investors avoid Pakistan. Even though inflation decreased to 6% in 2012 from 20% five years ago, the budget deficit widened in fiscal year 2011/12 to a record \$15 billion, equivalent to 6.6% of GDP. Foreign-exchange reserves have been drained (just \$10.2 billion at the end of 2012) due to the trade deficit and repayment of international loans, and a reduction in reimbursements from forces operating in Afghanistan after 2014 will further aggravate the problem.

Finally, Pakistan is entering a period of comprehensive transition of its whole leadership. The new parliament will choose the next president in September, the second tenure of the army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, will end in November, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, is expected to retire after reaching age 65 in December. After years of tense relations at the top, the replacement of powerful leaders of the judiciary and army by new chiefs gives hope for a more stable power equation. Although the army under Gen. Kayani has kept itself outside politics, the U.S. special forces raid that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011 dealt a major blow to its image domestically, so its interference in the elections cannot be completely ruled out as it may not like a too independent government to challenge its privileged position. It is important to note that recent opinion polls show little public confidence in democratic institutions and considerable levels of acceptance of military rule.

Conclusions. The first-ever democratic transition of power and subsequent changes in the highest posts in the army and judiciary allow for some optimism for the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan and a more stable neighbourhood. A likely victory by Nawaz Sharif's PML-N party, or a strong performance by Imran Khan's Justice party may increase anti-U.S. rhetoric in the next government but will not change Pakistan's strategic and foreign policy priorities. A stronger emphasis by the next government on a political settlement with Afghanistan and a non-military solution to its domestic conflicts may create an even more conducive environment for peace talks with the Taliban. In this context it is of crucial importance for the stability of Pakistan and the region to hold the elections as scheduled despite growing security concerns and controversies over the organisation of the voting so the next government may be empowered with a popular mandate. Although bringing the army under civilian control may need more time, Pakistan can soon get on the right track.

The EU, as a major trading and political partner of Pakistan, can play an important role in ensuring transparent and legitimate elections through its Election Observation Mission and political pressure. A democratic transfer of power would allow the EU to strengthen its development assistance to Pakistan and economic cooperation (i.e., granting Pakistan GSP+ status from 2014). Holding the third EU–Pakistan summit at the earliest opportunity to discuss all economic, political and regional challenges would be a good step in encouraging positive changes in the country. Poland, which has no significant presence in Pakistan can support the pro-democracy and pro-development policies of the EU. Democratic consolidation may make it easier for the transit of Polish military hardware from Afghanistan and open new opportunities for Polish companies in the future, especially in the extraction and energy sectors.