

# ISAS Brief

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## Pakistan Elects a New President

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### *Abstract*

*With the election, on 30 July 2013, of Mamnoon Hussain as Pakistan's next President, the country has completed the formal aspects of the transition to a democratic order. It has taken the country almost 66 years to reach this stage. As laid down in the Constitution of 1973, full executive authority is now in the hands of the prime minister who is responsible to the elected national assembly and will not hold power at the pleasure of the president. With the transition now complete, will the third-time Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, succeed in pulling the country out of the deep abyss into which it has fallen? Only time will provide a full answer to this question.*

Having won a decisive victory in the general election on 11 May 2013 and having been sworn into office on 5 June, Mian Mohammad Nawaz Sharif settled the matter of the presidency on 30 July. This office had acquired great importance in Pakistan's political evolution. Sharif had problems with the men who had occupied this office during his first two terms as Prime Minister – in 1990-93 and 1997-99. He was anxious that this time around the

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man (or woman) elected to this office will not stand in the way of the prime minister and the elected assembly. With that objective in view, he and his party chose Mamnoon Hussain, a relatively low-profile member of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), as their candidate for the presidency.

Hussain, born in 1940, had migrated to Pakistan in 1947. The family settled in Karachi, Pakistan's first capital, as did most Urdu-speaking migrants who left India and moved to Pakistan. Graduating from Karachi's Institute of Business Administration, he went into the textile business, setting up a spinning unit in his adopted city. He did well in business but also tried his hand in politics. He joined the Pakistan Muslim League rather than the Muttahida Qaumi Mahaz. The MQM was the preferred political group for the refugee community who called themselves the *muhajirs*. In June 1999, Nawaz Sharif, then into his second term as Prime Minister, appointed Hussain as the Governor of Sindh province. But he had to leave that office four months later when Sharif was removed by the military. In 2002, Hussain was given the PML-N ticket to fight for a seat in the National Assembly but lost by a wide margin to a candidate put up by the MQM. His loyalty to the PML-N rather than the MQM won him Sharif's support.

There was abundant political logic in Hussain's nomination by Sharif and the PML-N. Karachi, one of the world's largest cities, had, over the years, become an exceptionally violent place. The reason was a combination of demography, politics and economics. Over the last six decades, successive waves of migration had led to an explosion in the city's size; its population had increased forty-fold since 1947 when it was chosen as the capital of the new state of Pakistan.

The partition of British India displaced millions of Muslims from the provinces with Muslim minorities. A significant number of them, whose language was Urdu and who had the skills to staff the offices in the new government, headed towards Karachi. A construction boom began in Karachi to accommodate the new government and house its workers. This led to another wave of migration, this time bringing in construction workers from north Punjab, the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Kashmir. The two wars in Afghanistan and the way they spilled over into Pakistan displaced hundreds of thousands of people. A large number of them headed towards Karachi, finding refuge in the city's Pakhtun colonies.

These three communities of fresh arrivals competed with the city's original population for political and economic space. Pakistan's roller-coaster political development meant that the institutional infrastructure needed for aggregating these diverse interests did not take shape. Violence became the mode of expression for the members of these competing communities. Mamnoon Hussain, by bringing Karachi's voice into the corridors of power in Islamabad, may be able to come to Karachi's rescue. He is a member of the *Muhajir* community with a business background. And, until his election as President on 30 July, he was a member of the Punjab-dominated PML-N. This diverse background could help in Pakistan's efforts to steer an exceptionally diverse city to settle down.

In the 30-July election – brought forward by a week to accommodate those members of the electoral college who wished to travel to Mecca to observe the closing days of the month of Ramadan – Mamnoon Hussain won an easy victory, securing 432 votes, needing only 263 to win. The electoral college for the presidential office is made up of the national parliament’s two houses – the Senate and the National Assembly – and the four provincial assemblies.

The moment his election was made official by Fakhruddin G Ebrahim, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Hussain resigned from the PML-N, keeping his promise that he would be an apolitical head of the Pakistani state. Unlike his predecessor, Asif Ali Zardari, he will serve the nation and not a political party. In spite of the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution that made the prime minister the country’s chief executive, Zardari had continued to wield almost total executive authority. He was able to do that since he had assumed control of the Pakistan’s People’s Party, the PPP, after the death of his wife on 27 December 2007. Benazir Bhutto was assassinated after she addressed an election rally in Rawalpindi. Zardari moved quickly to establish his control over the PPP, appointing himself and his son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, as the party’s co-chairmen.

There was one unexpected development in the current move towards the establishment of a fully democratic order as represented by the latest presidential election. A day after the election, Chief Election Commissioner Ebrahim submitted his resignation to President Zardari, arguing that, while his term would have ended in 2017, he was of the view that he should step aside so that a new CEC could begin the process of preparing the country for the next general election. This must be held before the spring of 2018. “In my humble opinion, the newly elected members of Parliament should have the opportunity to forge new consensus and choose a new Chief Election Commissioner. This will also allow the next Chief Election Commissioner sufficient time and opportunity to prepare and lead the Election Commission for the general elections of 2018”, Ebrahim wrote in his letter of resignation to President Zardari whose own term runs out in September 2013.

With Hussain’s election, Pakistan has completed the process of political transition to a democratic order in which the chief executive is responsible to an assembly elected by the people. Nawaz Sharif can now turn to his long “to do” list.

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