**[Polls and their aftermath](https://www.dawn.com/news/1814089/polls-and-their-aftermath)**

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IT was perhaps the most consequential election in Pakistan’s recent history. Defying all odds, the voters turned out in record numbers. They have spoken out, loud and clear, and given their verdict. It was a vote for hope and democracy. But the people’s mandate seems to have been stolen yet again.

Events in the run-up to the elections had left little faith in the fairness of the polls. Still, the people came out, breaking down the walls of fear and hoping to bring change through the power of the ballot. The massive turnout of youth and women voters made the difference.

It was a protest vote against political repression and the status quo. Anti-establishment sentiment was quite palpable. The voting trend and initial poll results from Punjab and KP indicated a total rout of parties seen as having the military’s backing, in particular the PML-N. The PTI candidates took the lead in major constituencies.

Yet the final tally showed an incredibly different result. Many of the PML-N heavyweights who were lagging far behind PTI-affiliated candidates till late night were declared the winners the next morning. How this amazing turnaround happened is anybody’s guess. However, it was a different story in KP, where the result could not be altered much. The PTI held its ground in its main bastion.

It is certainly not for the first time that the country has witnessed such a mysterious overnight turnaround of poll results. We saw it, too, in the 2018 elections. It all depends on who is the favourite of the security establishment at the time. There was no doubt that the PTI was the main beneficiary of the ‘hand of God’ in the previous election. But what happened this time has hardly any precedent.

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The large-scale poll irregularities have drawn a strong international reaction. The US, UK, and the European Union have separately [expressed concerns](https://www.dawn.com/news/1812968) about Pakistan’s electoral process and [urged a probe](https://www.dawn.com/news/1813756/us-wants-pakistan-to-probe-election-irregularities) into the reported irregularities. But the most damning statement on the elections came from the UN secretary general, who [called on](https://www.dawn.com/news/1814048/un-chief-wants-legal-means-to-tackle-poll-dispute) the Pakistani authorities and political leaders to resolve the issues related to the election “through the established legal frameworks” and to refrain from taking any action that could raise tensions.

It is almost unprecedented for a UN official to make such remarks on an issue generally considered to be a country’s internal matter. These statements by the international community cannot be brushed aside. They clearly show the worsening global perception of Pakistan’s democratic process. It also brings into question the alleged involvement of the security establishment in manipulating the electoral process. Its footprints could be seen all over.

Despite the alleged irregularities, the PTI-backed ‘independents’ have emerged as the [single largest group](https://www.dawn.com/news/1812974) in the next National Assembly. But since the PTI is not recognised as a parliamentary party, it cannot get its share of some 70 reserved seats for women and religious minorities. Hence, the party cannot achieve even a simple majority to form a government at the centre. Moreover, it would be extremely tough for the group to maintain its unity in the face of intimidation by the security agencies and horse-trading.

Meanwhile, a new power play has begun, disregarding all democratic norms. Wheeling and dealing is the name of the game. It’s all about power and control that has brought together vested interests. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif appeared eager to declare victory despite the setback his PML-N received in its stronghold of Punjab.

While Sharif’s success in his home constituency of Lahore remains controversial, he has suffered a humiliating defeat in another constituency in KP’s Mansehra district. He may hold aspirations for a fourth term as prime minister. But it looks far more difficult for him now, with the PML-N failing to get even a simple majority. The party can only return to power if it can strike a deal with the PPP, which has emerged as the third largest group in the National Assembly.

In his [post-election speech](https://www.dawn.com/news/1812971), Sharif called for the formation of a unity government, comprising all the major parties, including the independents. He has also talked about a healing touch to unite the nation. It all sounds good but it doesn’t go beyond rhetoric. In a similar [statement](https://www.dawn.com/news/1813201/army-chief-backs-efforts-towards-healing-alliances), the army chief also urged Pakistan’s political parties to form a “unified government” to help the country move on from the politics of “anarchy and polarisation”.

It’s rare for an army chief to issue such political statements. It is not the mandate of the military leadership to tell the political leadership what kind of government there should be. But given the deep involvement of the security establishment in the political power equation, it has not come as a surprise. It also provides some insight into the emerging civil-military relationship.

It is apparent that the security establishment’s domination in the anticipated political set-up is likely to strengthen in a politically divided country. The unity which Sharif and the army chief are calling for cannot be achieved with the distortion of the democratic process. The allegation of election irregularities has further destabilised the country.

Meanwhile, negotiations between the PML-N and PPP have [begun](https://www.dawn.com/news/1814088/shehbaz-prevails-in-race-for-pm-house) but it will not be easy to form a stable coalition administration. While showing support for a PML-N-led government, the PPP appears to have decided not to join the future administration. It seems that its leadership has realised that a weak coalition with questionable legitimacy may not be able to deliver. With the PPP keeping itself out, it is likely to be a minority government led by the PML-N.

What has made the situation more complex are the varied mandates obtained in different provinces. While the PML-N seems to have emerged as the largest party in the Punjab provincial assembly, PTI-affiliated candidates have swept the polls in KP, strengthening its claim to form the government in the province. Any move to prevent the party from its democratic right to form the government could be disastrous.

The political fallout of a questionable electoral process cannot be easily resolved. Surely the country needs a healing touch but that can only happen by restoring the democratic rights of the people.

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*Published in Dawn, February 14th, 2024*