

# Is Democracy Dying in Pakistan?

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## How the Military and Judiciary Threaten the Upcoming Elections

By [Ahmed Rashid](#)

Pakistan's upcoming general elections on July 25 may be the most tense and fraught in the country's brief period of democracy, and there are lingering doubts about whether they will even be held on time. In Pakistan, the political establishment appears to be following the example of [Turkey](#) and [Egypt](#), where those in power clamped down on the media and intimidated civil society just before holding a vote. Although the elections are being supervised by a neutral interim civilian government, the real power appears to rest with Pakistan's military and the judiciary, which see undiluted democracy as a threat.

### THE MEDIA CRACKDOWN

The crackdown by Pakistan's army and judiciary has extended to civil society activists, bloggers, and human rights workers. But the primary target has been media outlets. Consider *Dawn*, Pakistan's oldest and largest-circulation English-language newspaper, which has faced a spate of threats, bans, and severe censorship. As punishment for reporting critically on the tense relationship between the military and judicial establishment on one side, and civilian politicians on the other, the army has restricted *Dawn*'s sale in bases across the country. Distributors, meanwhile, have been told not to sell it, TV providers are refusing to run its news channel, and the newspaper is unavailable in large parts of Balochistan, the country's largest province.

"Our hawkers are being stopped, they are being threatened and they have had their newspapers removed," Hameed Haroon, chief executive of the Dawn Media Group, [told](#) a gathering of senior editors in mid-June. He also said the freedom of the press was being undermined by "state institutions."

The national media environment is dismal. Pakistan [ranks](#) 139 out of 180 on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. Censorship and self-censorship on issues that cast the military in a negative light have become pervasive. Many TV stations, for example, are refusing to cover a new protest movement by young Pashtuns that accuses the military and others of human rights abuses against members of their ethnic group, who live mainly on the border with Afghanistan.

The past two years have also seen multiple disappearances and kidnappings of journalists and other activists, some of whom were freed after several weeks or months in detention but have been too afraid to say who kidnapped them or why. Some of those who chose to seek refuge abroad after being freed have admitted to being beaten and tortured, although they have not named the perpetrators. In early June, the prominent journalist and TV pundit Gul Bukhari, who had been critical of the military in blog posts, was kidnapped on her way to a TV studio in the center of Lahore by five carloads of men. Fortunately, she was quickly freed. Only a day before Bukhari was picked up, army spokesman Major General Asif Ghafoor said in a press conference that the army was not dictating to the media but was carefully [watching](#) the social media accounts, which he referred to as "troll accounts," of several mainstream journalists.

### THE MILITARY'S POPULIST NARRATIVE

The crackdown on media has taken place amid high levels of tension between the military and judicial establishment and the outgoing Pakistan Muslim League government over alleged corruption by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and PML legislators (despite the fact that corruption is widespread among all major parties). Sharif had also challenged the army's control of foreign policy and its refusal to end hostility toward neighboring India and Afghanistan.

Sharif was prime minister until his ouster in July 2017 stemming from corruption charges. On July 6 of this year, an anticorruption court convicted him, his daughter, and his son-in-law of holding properties in one of London's wealthiest districts and not providing sufficient evidence as to where the funds to pay for them came from. Sharif received a sentence of ten years in jail and eight million pounds (\$10.6 million), while his daughter Maryam has been fined two million pounds (\$2.6 million) and given a jail sentence of seven years. Sharif and his party claimed he was being victimized by the courts and the military. Meanwhile, some PML candidates running in the elections were asked by intelligence agencies to drop their party membership and join other parties or stand as independents. The party that most benefited from this undermining of the PML was former cricketer Imran Khan's Pakistan Movement for Justice (PTI), which is considered to be close to the military.

In conducting this anti-PML campaign, the military is tapping into a populist vein, pushing a narrative that civilian politicians have milked the country dry with their corruption while portraying itself as determined to help clean up the political stage and safeguard a free and fair election without imposing military rule. As part of this

push, the Supreme Court earlier this year ordered all candidates in the elections to reveal details of their assets and wealth. Leading politicians in all major parties have disclosed multiple properties and bank accounts around the world. But those parties and politicians who appear not to openly question the army's role—such as Khan's PTI or the Pakistan Peoples Party, once led by Benazir Bhutto—are spared any investigations of the kind Sharif faced.

“A creeping coup has taken place against the authority of the civilian government,” said Farhatullah Babar, an outspoken former senator and prominent opposition leader. “It is different from the martial law of the past, with two resulting outcomes: the civilian government exists, but has no authority; press freedom exists, but journalists have no freedom,” he [told](#) a journalists' union recently.

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So far, the Pakistani public has shown little enthusiasm for the upcoming elections as political confusion mounts and terrorist attacks continue. As it stands, the election will probably lead to a fragmented and weak coalition government, a desirable outcome for the military and courts. None of the parties can claim a nationwide base. At most, each party's strength is limited to only one or two of Pakistan's four provinces. Despite efforts by the establishment to curtail the PML, as well as the uncertainty around its future leadership, the party has by and large held on to its traditional base of support. Although it may lose power, it is likely that the PML will win in Punjab, the country's most populous province with the greatest number of seats in parliament. Its leader in Punjab is Shahbaz Sharif, Nawaz's younger brother. Although he has not been hit with corruption charges, Shahbaz lacks leadership qualities.

The primary challenger to the PML is Khan, whose PTI is attracting many of those candidates who have support from the establishment. Khan is considered to be a favorite of the army, but his support is largely confined to the north of the country. Moreover, he has badly mishandled his election campaign by allowing his party to take on many of the deserters from other parties. Doing so has undermined his own appeal to his youthful base, who did not expect him to field these aging and corrupt politicians. Meanwhile, the Pakistan Peoples Party, which once had a national base of support under Benazir Bhutto's charismatic leadership, now finds its electoral power limited to the southern province of Sindh.

## **EXTREMISM ON THE BALLOT?**

The army should be focused on ending terrorism, but in the run-up to the elections, there have been multiple lethal suicide attacks on candidates in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provinces. Some 170 people were killed, including two electoral candidates, and 300 wounded. Claims of responsibility for the attacks came from the Pakistani Taliban and other extremist groups. Instead of trying to isolate these groups, however, the military is trying to mainstream them. The judiciary and electoral commission are allowing some extremist organizations under new aliases and identities to run in the elections. Some 200 candidates, for example, are being fielded by the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Faithful) under a new electoral platform called Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek (God Is Great Movement). Lashkar was declared a global terrorist group by the UN, and the United States has a \$10 million bounty on its leader, Hafiz Saeed. Lashkar has carried out major terrorist attacks in India and elsewhere, including the attack in Mumbai that killed 166 people in 2008. Another example is Aurangzeb Farooqi, leader of the radical anti-Shiite sectarian group Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, who was cleared by Pakistani courts to run in the elections despite being on the country's own terrorism watch list. None of these groups are expected to win a seat, but their extremist slogans and tactics may force a close vote in many constituencies.

The freedom given to extremists to stand in the elections comes just after Pakistan was placed on the watch list of the Financial Action Task Force for failing to act against terrorist financing from its soil. If Islamabad does not clamp down on money laundering and fundraising by extremist groups by September, it could end up on the FATF blacklist, which would lead to sanctions.

## **FOREIGN POLICY AND THE FUTURE**

Aside from standard bread-and-butter issues, a chief concern for voters heading into the polls will be the question of what the army's political role should be in a democratic society and how much influence it should wield in Pakistan's future government, especially in terms of foreign policy. Dawn's investigations into civil-military tensions on this very question prompted the military's angry response. The army has long controlled foreign policy, especially relations with Afghanistan, China, India, and the United States. Sharif tried several times during his tenure in office, for example, to make peace with India. He also tried to help end the bloody civil war in Afghanistan and to cease Pakistani support and sanctuary for militant groups such as the Afghan Taliban. Yet his efforts were continually thwarted by the military, which considered him to be overstepping his powers. Only after continued enmity and accusations by Afghan and U.S. officials that Pakistan is still helping the Taliban has the army finally established rapprochement with Kabul—years after Sharif had tried to do the same. Meanwhile, other militant Islamic groups based in Punjab Province with apparent official sanction continue to try to infiltrate Indian Kashmir and launch attacks. As a result of both that and the unwillingness of India's Hindu nationalist government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi to engage, relations between the two neighbors are at their all-time worst.

Every post-election period in Pakistan's much-troubled history has led to accusations of fraud, rigging, and manipulation. This time, however, the fear is of pre-poll rigging and clearing the playing field of unwanted politicians by a judicial-military establishment that has become far too powerful and does not want to see genuine democracy flourish. There is also the fear that those political parties being victimized by the Pakistani deep state could boycott the results of the election and refuse to accept them. A nuclear-armed Pakistan in the center of a vastly troubled region, which neighbors a Middle East where failed states have become the norm, cannot afford further domestic instability. It is time for all the power centers to work together and ensure a free and fair election.