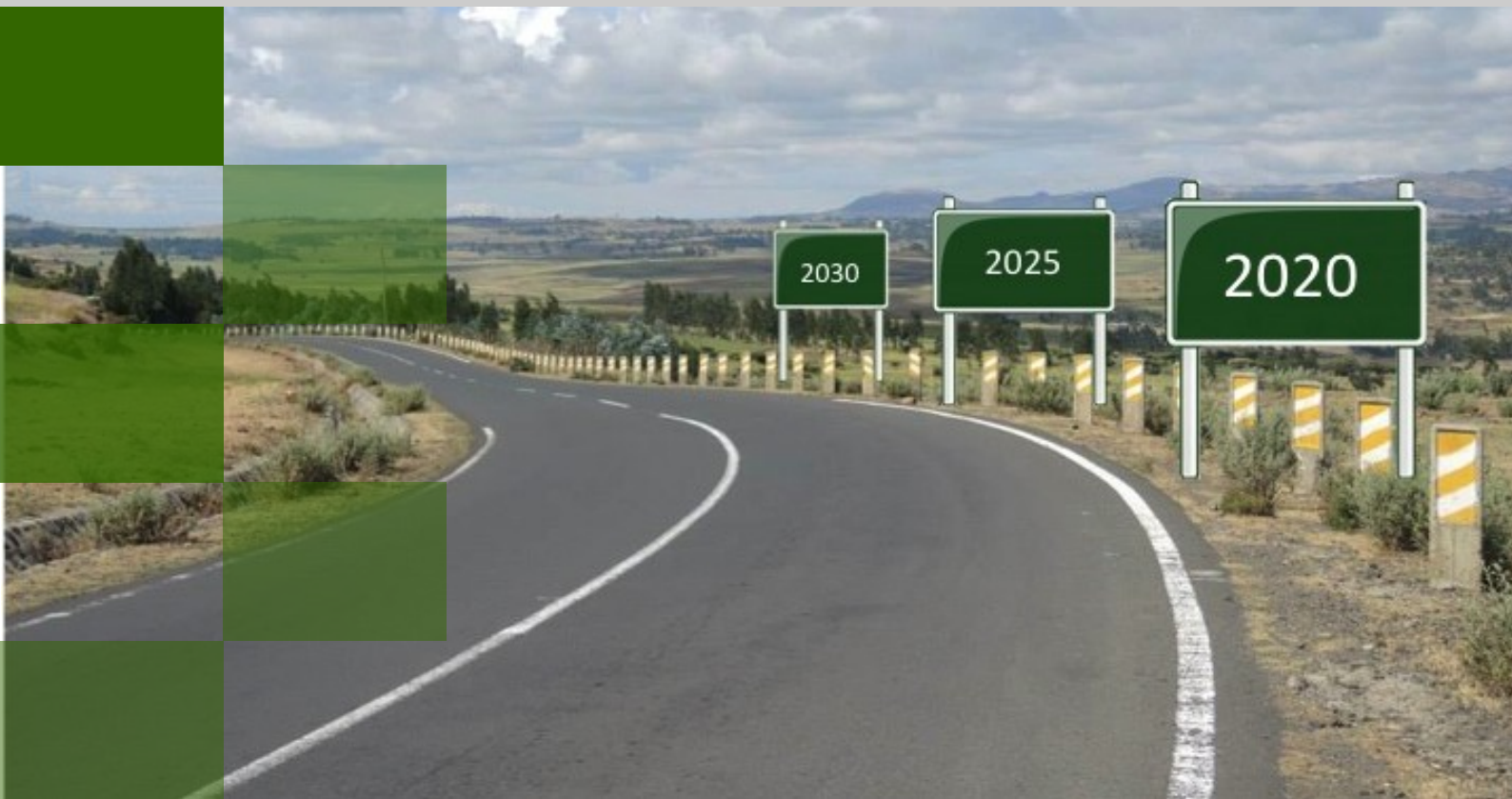


Trends. Threats. Projections

Pakistan Elections 2018: Likely Winners, Runners and Losers

D. Suba Chandran



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D. Suba Chandran

Professor & Dean, NIAS

Will Imran Khan finally become the Prime Minister, and enable the PTI to form the government, after decades of political fight? Will Shahbaz Sharif be able to succeed in overcoming the recent reverses for the PML-N, including the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif and attempts to break the ranks of the party?

Who will be the next Prime Minister of Pakistan? Which party will form the next government at the national level, following the 25 July 2018 elections?

I

Seven Questions:

Pre and Post Elections 2018

Four Questions, pre elections

Is it finally the moment of truth for Imran Khan, which he has been waiting for the last two decades? Will the Captain be finally able to win the post of the Prime Minister for his party and himself?

Will Imran be able to break through Shahbaz's defence in Punjab? This will decide whether Imran would become the next PM or not.

Punjab holds the key. And Shahbaz's hold over the province gives him and the PML-N a slight edge.

Or, will it be the moment of truth for Shahbaz Sharif to finally emerge from the shadows of his elder brother – Nawaz Sharif? Will one of the most powerful Chief Ministers of Punjab, be able to work out a miracle at the national level, thereby retaining the PML-N's hold over Pakistan's polity?

What will be the fate of the PPP, Zardari and Bilawal? Ten years after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the star attraction of the PPP and the last in the line of Bhuttos,

will the Peoples Party be able to have a national presence? Or, will it become a regional party?

Finally, what about the other parties – ANP, MQM, PkMAP, PML-Q, JUI-F etc, that had a national presence, with at least seats in double digits in the past in the Parliament? Will they succeed in having more than ten seats in the National Assembly this time?

Three Questions, post elections

Elections on 25 July will provide answers to most of the above questions but also is likely to raise more problems when the final results get announced.

What if no single party gets adequate seats for the government in the National Assembly that has 372 seats? Will the PPP emerge as a kingmaker, despite not having enough seats at the national assembly?

While Shahbaz has kept the PML-N intact to a large extent until now, will he be able to do so, if the party is unable to have a clear lead after the elections? Will there be a post elections political trade monitored by a third umpire?

Will there be more challenges in the provincial assemblies? While KP and Punjab are likely to witness stability led by the PTI and PML-N respectively, in Balochistan and Sindh, the electoral results are expected to throw more questions.

II

The Road to 25 July 2018 Immediate Backdrop

For the PML-N, there is an added disadvantage, thanks to judicial verdicts; some even referred it as a “judicial coup”. The disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, multiple cases in the courts, media coverage of the court hearings, statements from the judges and the verdicts did affect the image of Nawaz Sharif and the party.

The road to 25 July 2018 was not an easy one, given the electoral history of Pakistan, and the political developments during the recent months. The fact that, Pakistan will be witnessing elections without a break as scheduled for a third time in a row, is a record. Despite Imran Khan’s best efforts to prepone this process either on his own or along with mavericks such as Tahirul Qadri, the fact that elections are taking place as scheduled itself is an achievement.

Also, there was a fear that the elections may be postponed. Cases were filed in the Courts on issues relating to delimitation and electoral rolls based on the new census. There was a conspiracy theory – that a section wanted to postpone the elections to ensure that Nawaz Sharif gets convicted and goes to the jail and that the PML-N gets vertically divided. While Nawaz got sentenced and placed in prison, the second thing did not happen. There were a few defections to the PTI, new formations especially in South Punjab – however, the party stands united, thanks primarily to Shahbaz Sharif.

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Statements from the National Accountability Bureau were also misleading and done with a purpose to bring down Nawaz’s credibility. For example, the statement by the NAB Chairman (based on a newspaper report that was discredited already) on Nawaz Sharif laundering money through India amounting to 4.9 billion USD was a deliberate attempt to malign him.

However, Nawaz Sharif and his daughter were brave enough to return to Pakistan and get jailed, instead of staying back in London. The PML-N is unhappy; but, it has used the “martyr for democracy” slogan effectively in Punjab.

Besides PML-N, another party that has been at a significant disadvantage is the MQM. Though Altaf Hussain should take the primary blame for getting the party discredited through his ramblings from London, the Deep State made effective use of the same. The party split into two major factions following the Altaf fiasco.

Recent developments in Karachi hint at political engineering to weaken the MQM from becoming a dominant political force, but keep it afloat enough to create space for any political bargaining at a later stage. MQM today is a shadow of its past, and contests the 2018 elections as a divided house, and from weakest position ever since it started taking part in elections.

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III

So who will win? Who will falter? And who will come close to the Line?

Million dollars question on the eve of elections.

Before looking at the likely winners, and who will come close to winning, it is easier to find out those who are not going to be anywhere close to the finishing line.

Who is not likely to win?

First and foremost in the list of not going to win, is the PPP. For a party that swept the elections in 2008, after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and created history in completing its term in 2013, the PPP is not going to make an impact at the national level. It will poll votes in double digits, between 12 and 15 percentage, but not going to convert the same into seats in the National Assembly. At best, the PPP will become a regional party with Sindh as its base. If there are no clear winners, the PPP may be able to play a role of the kingmaker; Zardari has been known for the same.

Second – regional political parties – ANP and MQM – in KP and Sindh respectively, are likely to concede more space to the others. It is unfortunate that the ANP has become a regional party now; with its presence limited to KP and parts of Karachi in Sindh. PTI is likely to eat into this space – both in KP and Karachi. MQM should be extremely happy, if it touches the double-digit for the National Assembly, though in terms of percentage of votes, it is likely to remain in single digit.

Third, the PML-Q. Gen Musharraf who was the brain behind its formation, has deserted the party long ago. Whatever was left of the party, 2018 elections will finish it off. PML-Q should be a lesson to those leaders who believe in defecting from a leading party with the belief that the Establishment will support them forever.

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Fourth, the religious parties led by the MMA. Except for the JUI-F, other religious, political parties are likely to face a rout. Besides the PTI, far right parties like the Labbaik are likely to eat into the traditional religious parties like JI and JUI-S.

The JUI-F may be the only exception; thanks to Fazlur Rehman and

the organisational structure, the party may still be able to win some seats certainly in KP, FATA and Balochistan. Perhaps even in Karachi.

PkMAP in Balochistan will retain its limited presence in Balochistan. But, will the party be able to play an active role at the national level? Unlikely.

So, who is likely to win?

The above analysis means there are only two parties in contention at the national level – PTI and PML-N.

If there is one party and one individual who has been the direct beneficiary of the Panama Papers, its political fallouts and the subsequent judicial trials and verdicts – undoubtedly it is the PTI and Imran Khan.

Second, the difference between the Establishment and Nawaz Sharif has also helped Imran Khan. Whether the Deep State is supporting Imran Khan directly or otherwise, he has been the primary beneficiary of the cold war between the Establishment and Nawaz.

Third, one should not ignore Imran Khan's perseverance. Even before Panama politics unfolded, pre and post 2013 elections, Imran Khan has been on an offensive. If the previous elections were the best until now, ever since he founded the PTI, 2018 elections will improve the tally further – both in terms of percentage of the total votes polled, and the number of seats won. From 15 per cent of the votes polled last time, PTI is expected to almost double it in 2018. That itself will be a considerable achievement for PTI and Imran Khan.

PTI is likely to win considerably in KP and make inroads in urban Sindh, especially Karachi. Though he is expecting his partners will get him some rewards in rural Sindh, PPP will retain it. But, the primary challenge for Imran Khan will be Punjab, mainly north and central Punjab.

Will PTI be able to make inroads into Punjab, especially its heartland? If Imran succeeds in it, he will become the next Prime Minister.

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But the above is not likely to be an easy task. This should bring the PML-N and Shahbaz Sharif into the focus. Will the PML-N be able to retain its hold over Punjab, and win a few seats in Balochistan and KP? Out of the total 372 seats in the National Assembly, 174 are from Punjab. So if PML-N and Shahbaz Sharif can protect their home ground and use the party's strong roots in the province, PML-N should be able to sail through. And see Shahbaz as the next Prime Minister.

Will Imran be able to break through Shahbaz's defence in Punjab? This will decide whether Imran would become the next PM or not. Punjab holds the key. And Shahbaz's hold over the province gives him and the PML-N a slight edge.

IV

What if the verdict leads to a hung Parliament? The Provincial Politics and their National Fallouts

Is there a possibility of the PML-N remaining the single largest party, yet not having sufficient number to form the government on its own? Likely.

Hung Parliament will make Zardari a Kingmaker

If the verdict is divided with neither PML-N nor PTI getting the required number, PPP and Zardari will become important. While who comes first and second (between PML-N and PTI) is not clear on the eve of the elections, PPP coming third, with a strong performance in Sindh is expected. While MQM and PTI (in that order) will have an influence in urban Sindh, especially Karachi, PPP is likely emerge as the single largest party from Sindh – both for national and provincial assemblies. PPP's strength in Sindh provincial assembly post 2018 elections will determine its play in the Parliament, if there is a divided verdict at the national level.

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Will Zardari go with PML-N or PTI? Imran Khan should be a larger challenge for the PPP in Sindh than PML-N. On the other hand, Zardari's equation with Nawaz Sharif has not been cordial during the recent controversies. Will Shahbaz be able to strike an understanding with Zardari, or will the latter be pressurized by the Deep State against it – will be an issue. But Zardari has been as wily as a fox; he would like to decide based on his immediate priorities.

What about MQM, MMA and the Baloch Independents?

Parliamentarians from Balochistan, especially the independents, will be easier to persuade, in case of a hung Parliament. Going by the recent history of political engineering in Balochistan, this is a foregone conclusion. Smaller parties and independents from Balochistan are more prone to making deals.

For the MQM, much will depend on how many seats it will be able to secure in 2018 elections. In the 2013 elections, the party won 24 seats for the National Assembly, 51 for the Sindh provincial assembly. In 2008 elections, it had won a similar number for the two assemblies. The party had emerged as the fourth largest in the Parliament in the 2013 elections. But then, the MQM was different; with Altaf Hussain as the ideologue and undisputed leader, the party was united and controlled Karachi. Its influence on Sindh provincial assembly also was substantial.

MQM's bargaining strength post 2018 elections will depend on its electoral performance for both national and provincial assemblies. The MQM's provincial interests, especially in Karachi will define its position at the national level post 2018 elections, if there is a hung Parliament.

Outside the JUI of Fazlur Rahman, the MMA is likely to have no significant presence at the national level. Fazlur will prefer to work with Shahbaz and the PML-N, than with Imran. He would like to keep his party's interests in KP and FATA also in mind, where his primary contest will be with the PTI.

Will there be another Jamali?

Who knows, if there is a hung Parliament, and if the leading parties could not reach an understanding, the political engineers may succeed in getting another Jamali as a Prime Minister from Balochistan! Remember Zafarullah Khan Jamali becoming the Prime Minister of the PML-Q government in 2002 under Musharraf led elections? He was projected as a consensus candidate of the PML-Q, with MMA, MQM and other parties supporting that project.

In the recent period, there was a similar experiment in Baloch provincial assembly. Political engineering in Balochistan provincial assembly led to Mir Abdul Quddus Bizenjo becoming the Chief Minister of the province between January and June 2018. Remember, Mir Bizenjo had polled only 544 votes from the Awaran Constituency in Balochistan in the 2013 elections!

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So, if there is a hung Parliament, one should not be surprised to see Bizenjo becoming the next Prime Minister!

V Conclusion

The primary contest will be between the PML-N and the PTI. Punjab will be the battlefield that will decide the outcome.

25 July election is likely to witness a good turnout, despite pre-elections violence. During the last two elections – 2013 and 2008, the polling was good with 54 and 44 percent respectively. Especially in Punjab, it was 58 and 48 percent respectively. One could expect a better turnout this year especially in Punjab. Many of them would be first time voters as well.

Given the strong organizational presence of the PML-N in Punjab, and Shahbaz's work and reach as the Chief Minister, he seems to have an edge in the province, however slender it may be.

An abridged version of the above was first published as a news paper commentary in the Rising Kashmir.



About the author

D. Suba Chandran is a Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies and the Dean of School of Conflict and Security Studies.

He runs a portal on Pakistan:
www.pakistanreader.org

Views expressed are author's own