



BRIEFING PAPER

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Pakistan: January 2018 update

By Jon Lunn

Contents:

1. Electoral outlook
2. International challenges



Contents

Summary	3
1. Electoral outlook	5
2. International challenges	7

Summary

National elections are due to be held in Pakistan in mid-2018. It will inevitably be a [testing year](#) for the country's still-fragile democracy. The ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) hopes to win a second term in office.

The party is highly unlikely to experience the same level of electoral devastation in 2018 that the incumbent government, the Pakistan People's Party, suffered in 2013, when the PML-N swept to victory. Indeed, several analysts have predicted that it will win again. However, the PML-N could yet lose, or – this is more likely – fall short of a majority and need to find coalition partners to stay in power. They may not be easy to find.

In July 2017 Nawaz Sharif was forced to resign as prime minister after being disqualified from public office by the country's Supreme Court in connection with corruption allegations arising from the so-called '[Panama Papers](#)' – a development which many observers believe was instigated by the military, with which Sharif has long had poor relations. However, Nawaz has now [re-emerged](#) as party leader. His brother, Shabaz, is the PML-N's candidate for prime minister in the forthcoming elections.

Rival political groupings are threatening the PML-N's hold over key political constituencies, not least in Punjab, the country's biggest and most prosperous state. Here too, some see the hand of the military.

Meanwhile, although there has overall been an improvement in the domestic security situation, extremist groups like the Pakistani Taliban continue to carry out terrorist operations. The north-western tribal areas and Pakistan's [biggest province](#), Balochistan, remain restive. There has been a [near-breakdown](#) of law and order in the Pakistan's largest city, Karachi. Human Rights Watch has recently [warned](#) of growing threats to freedom of association and expression.

The army chief of staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa has said that Pakistan faces "[monumental challenges](#)" this year.

At the international level, 2018 has already seen further [turbulence](#) in the relationship between Pakistan and traditionally its closest (but often uneasy) international ally, the US. On 2 January, President Donald Trump used trademark colourful language to throw serious doubt on future US military funding for Pakistan unless Pakistan took serious action against the Afghan Taliban and the [Haqqani Network](#), which parts of the security establishment have long sponsored. Both groups continue to wage war against the US-backed Afghan government and have 'headquarters' in Pakistan's borderlands with Afghanistan.

A tranche of US security aid worth US\$255 million has now been suspended. Pakistan has responded by [suspending](#) intelligence-sharing with the US.

4 Pakistan: January 2018 update

The US, along with other Western allies, are also highly concerned about the prospect that [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#) (now called Jamaat-ud-Dawa), whose leader was released from detention last year, may be allowed to contest the national elections.

In this context, Pakistan's close ties with China may become more important than ever. Relations with India remain fraught.

For further background on Pakistan's politics, economy and society see the following Library briefing papers:

[Pakistan in 2013](#) (December 2012);

[Pakistan: November 2015 update](#).

1. Electoral outlook

The PML-N enjoys a [substantial majority](#) in parliament. While it has fallen short of many expectations, supporters assert that it has significant political, economic and security [achievements](#) to its name.

The PML-N's candidate for prime minister will be Shab haz Sharif (taking over from the current caretaker Shahid Khaqan Abbasi), Nawaz Sharif's younger brother and currently chief minister in Punjab. Nawaz, now party leader after being ousted as prime minister last year (see above), remains a powerful figure. However, his shift into the role of party leader is currently being challenged in the courts.

The party is highly unlikely to experience the same level of electoral devastation in 2018 that the incumbent government, the Pakistan People's Party, suffered in 2013, when the PML-N swept to victory. Indeed, several analysts have predicted that it will win again.

However, historically incumbents have [struggled](#) to win a second term in office and the military does not want the PML-N, which it forcibly evicted from power in 1999 through a coup led by General Pervez Musharraf, to return.

Some of its economic reforms have hit poorer sections of the population in their pocket. According to a [recent poll](#), the poor appear to be less impressed with the government's performance than those on higher incomes.

So the PML-N could yet lose, or – this is more likely – fall short of a majority and need to find coalition partners to stay in power. But they won't be easy to find.

The PPP has a new, young leader in [Bilawal Bhutto Zardari](#), but analysts doubt that it will be in a fit state to mount much of a political comeback. It is unlikely to want to play the role of junior partner in a coalition. Relations between the Bhutto and Sharif dynasties are as poor as ever.

What is more, the PML-N has always been hostile to the PPP's secular politics, and an alliance with it could further weaken its support amongst key political constituencies in Punjab.

Could the PML-N form a coalition government with the PTI, led by former cricketer Imran Khan? The PTI has set out its stall as the [main challenger](#) to the PML-N in Punjab, so an alliance with it might be seen by the supporters of either side as an unacceptable act of political 'self-harm'.

Imran Khan has also styled himself as a [campaigner](#) for truth and justice who is unwilling to contemplate 'grubby' political compromises. He might insist on being given the premiership if he was to join a coalition, something the PML-N seems sure to resist.

Some allege that the army [favours](#) the PTI. Such claims circulated ahead of the 2013 elections but ultimately the party failed to make a big electoral breakthrough.

This underscores the fact that, powerful though the military remains in Pakistan, it is not simply Pakistan's political puppet-master. But it may be hoping that in 2018 the PTI will do much better. But while it may well win more seats, it is doubtful it will end up as the largest party, let alone win a majority.

How to make sense of the recent reinvigoration of Islamist political groupings? One coalition of such groups, the [Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal](#) (MMA), appeared to have receded into history but is showing renewed signs of political life and has announced that it will be standing in the 2018 elections.

L-e-T's recently created political vehicle is called the Milli Muslim League (MML). Led by Hafeez Saeed, viewed by impartial observers as behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks but [released](#) by the courts last November after ten months under house arrest due to "lack of evidence", it is unclear what its political agenda is. Has it been created with the [blessing](#) of the army to undermine the PML-N? Ex-president Pervez Musharraf has said from exile that he might form an electoral alliance with the MML.

Other Islamist groupings are also on the scene, including [Tehreek-e-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah](#), which in November 2017 laid siege to the capital, Islamabad, forcing the law minister to resign for allegedly committing 'blasphemy', until the army brokered a deal which ended their protests. It too has said that it plans to put up candidates in the elections.

Analyst Christine Fair has [claimed](#) that the behaviour of the army generals reflects their fear that "significant democratization of Pakistan's governance will undermine their ability to run and ruin the country at their whim. Thus they developed new tools to prevent democracy from sinking its roots too deeply" – for example, by leaning on a compliant judiciary to launch politically-motivated cases against civilian politicians and by providing behind-the-scenes backing for the activities of Islamist political groupings.

Some even [speculate](#) (perhaps a little melodramatically) that Pakistan could be facing a "Mullah-military takeover".

While the leaders of many of the main opposition parties have spoken on the same platform recently, calling on the PML-N to stand-down and call elections immediately, there appears little prospect that they might form a [united front](#) against it – there is just too much mistrust amongst them.

Some observers argue that an early election would be a [good bet](#) for the PML-N, as it would short-circuit efforts to [destabilise](#) the party.

2. International challenges

If the outcome of the 2018 election is in the balance. How might things play out in terms of Pakistan's relationships with the US, China and India? When we ask this question, we are really talking about the stance of the army – civilian government have relatively little influence on security and foreign policy.

Up to now, the Pakistani military's view seems to have been that the 'bark' of the new US administration in Washington, DC, will prove worse than its 'bite' when it criticises Pakistan for being a 'terrorist safe haven'. Bruce Riedel recently [said](#) that the Trump administration "has yet to lay out a strategy to deal with the issue."

The original US announcement in August 2017 that security aid would be suspended did not lead to a change of policy. Will confirmation that one tranche worth \$255 million has now been suspended, or further withheld tranches later in the year worth up to \$1.75 billion, change the stance of the Pakistani military?

Pakistan does have some [leverage](#) of its own. It has [suspended](#) intelligence-sharing with the US. There are other things it could do too by way of retaliation. For example, it has in the past shown itself willing to close NATO supply routes from Pakistan into Afghanistan.

The option of making an even bigger call on China for support (it has promised to invest \$60 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative) does exist for Pakistan.

On CPEC, the army and the PML-N government are as one. Some Pakistani commentators are advocating such a realignment. But others [prefer](#) an approach that would reduce Pakistan's reliance on all outside sponsors.

The US has increasingly tilted towards India in recent years. But it will not want to burn all its boats with Pakistan. So the likelihood is that there will another period of 'tit-for-tat' retaliation during the first half of the year – sovereignty/anti-Americanism will be tempting memes for Pakistani politicians to draw upon for electoral purposes – but that Pakistan and the US will avoid a complete breakdown in cooperation.

Pakistan may again scale up military operations against militants, while leaving the world less than entirely clear exactly who is being targeted. Civilians will once again be significant 'collateral damage'.

If this [prognosis](#) materialises, it will reflect the fact that Pakistan's regional strategic calculus has not changed and that, for the US, Afghanistan – despite a [relatively small increase](#) in the number of its troops on the ground in recent months – will not be a top foreign policy priority for the US over the coming period.

If there is one constant in Pakistani foreign and security policy, it is ongoing tension with India. The two sides remain at loggerheads over Kashmir amid ongoing exchanges of fire across the [Line of Control](#).

8 Pakistan: January 2018 update

There seems little chance of any kind of rapprochement during 2018 – or, for that matter, in 2019, when it is India's turn to go to the polls. Indeed, the greater likelihood is of increased clashes which will need to be carefully managed to avoid the two nuclear weapons states from stumbling into outright conflict.

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