

# Pakistan bats for Imran Khan



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**MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED**

Contrary to media reports leading up to the polls, Pakistan's powerful military and its political allies encountered an unexpected outcome in the recently concluded election: a resounding surge of support for the imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan and an equally categorical rejection of the establishment.

Khan's clout originates from a general belief that he can do no wrong while representing Pakistan, a country where politicians are viewed as either spineless opportunists or casualties of military coercion. Today, his ability to both captivate and galvanise a young electorate—exhausted by the army's dominance and tired of the legacy of corrupt dynastic parties—has positioned Khan as a messianic saviour. Pakistan is facing a broken political system, a devastating economic landscape, and a future riddled with despair—all while being geographically positioned in a location where global superpowers remain invested.

Imran Khan established the PTI party in 1996, and incrementally rode a wave of growing popularity to become Pakistan's most powerful political actor. In 2018, he formed a government that was heralded as a symbolic manifestation of the kind of people's government Pakistanis had desired for decades. His government did not complete its full tenure. Indeed, this was quite predictable. No Pakistani prime minister has ever completed a full term in office in the country's 76-year history. Pakistan's military—with Washington's patronage—has a consistent track record of ousting elected governments in Islamabad.

In 2022, a military-backed, backroom-engineered, no-confidence motion ejected Khan from power. He has been in prison since August last year amid criticism of judicial oppression directed at him and his supporters. Criminal convictions prevented Khan from contesting in the recent election. The speed at which sentences were handed down, the existence of over 200 legal cases against him, and a slew of indictments against his wife and other family members are part and parcel of how Pakistan's generals co-opt the legal system to draw curtains on political careers. If history is to be trusted, these cases

appear to be politically motivated.

Khan, however, has turned the table on the military. In fact, his detention has boosted his popularity. Despite a months-long crackdown that hindered electoral campaigning and saw the PTI barred from contesting as a party—forcing Khan's candidates to run as independents—the PTI made a remarkable showing in the recent election. This feat can only be described as a triumph. Khan's team secured 101 of 265 seats, significantly more than the seat share of other parties that are still being favoured by the military to be sworn into office.

The PTI has complained about vote-rigging, claiming it was deprived of around 70 additional seats—a number that would have granted them an absolute majority to easily form a government. Khan's opponents, the army-backed parties PML-N and PPP took 71 seats and 53 seats, respectively—with minor parties taking the remainder and 15 of the elected 266-seat national assembly seats yet to be announced. The election process was plagued by unexplained delays, a telecommunications blackout, and various other alleged irregularities.

Leading up to the polls, the PTI revolutionised campaigning through social media rallies and artificial intelligence. Facing regulations that barred television channels from mentioning Khan or broadcasting his clips—along with a ban on in-person rallies—the PTI adapted by taking its campaigning online. They hosted rallies on YouTube and TikTok, circumventing state-sponsored attempts to block internet access. This strategy played an important role in winning the youth vote for PTI-affiliated independent candidates.

The PTI's media team utilised AI to repurpose an old clip of Khan, a tactic analysts have hailed as a masterstroke in political communication. AI-generated speeches of Khan—employed before the polls—were not just innovative; they inspired Pakistan's youth to weaponise the vote as a tool to push back against the status quo. Equally, his post-election speech from prison has been a clarion call, urging supporters to stay on the streets to ensure that his candidates are allowed to form a government.

The bottom line is that how Pakistanis voted in the recent election represented a rare but powerful rebuke of the army's long-standing manipulation of elections. Voters showed disdain for the increasingly overt attempts to undermine Khan's party and prevent his return to office. These events offer lessons for the West, especially regarding how

the Pakistani military to remove him from power.

The Intercept detailed a conversation between Pakistan's former ambassador to the US and Donald Lu, assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. This exchange hinted that Washington would overlook and forgive Khan's pro-Russian actions

new storyline, Pakistanis now vocally reject this form of West-backed political manoeuvring.

Taking a step back to search for credible proof on whether the US formally engaged in a full-blown conspiracy to remove Khan from power may yield no legitimate findings. Evidence for such a conspiracy is minimal. However, the

Afghanistan—while using Pakistan as its ragdoll in the war on terror.

A surge in youth participation in the recent election—representing 44 percent of voters—is a turning point in Pakistani politics. Women turned out in large numbers, overcoming barriers to make their voices heard. The overall turnout—expected to surpass the usual 45 to 50 percent—is a win in itself for democracy. Particularly pioneering has been the use of social media to counteract the constraints imposed by censorship. For the US, relying on Pakistan's military as a stabilising force is untenable in a society eager for change.

Pakistan's military is unlikely to allow Khan-backed independent candidates to form a government. Even if permitted, such a government would likely be held captive to the whims of individuals who may choose or be forced to desert a seemingly wobbly coalition. More likely, as things are beginning to shape up, Khan's rivals, led by two political dynasties, will band together in a coalition, thus keeping Khan imprisoned and the PTI away from power. Pakistan's future is unclear, but it is obvious that Imran Khan will remain a part of that future, whether in prison, in the streets, or as an emblem of the kind of change Pakistanis aspire to achieve.

The US must face a harsh truth: its historic backing of military-led schemes to influence politics via clandestine back-channel deals is steering Pakistanis closer to China and Russia. It is no secret that the US has compromised Pakistan's democratic integrity by collaborating with its military for decades in the name of strategic motives and regional security. Pakistanis are fed up with being mere pawns and are throwing their support behind a leader who, despite his many imperfections, dares to challenge the West on equal terms rather than bowing subserviently like his predecessors.

Imran Khan is no saint. He has had his share of contentious dealings with Pakistan's military and the radical right. To expect countries like Pakistan to magically become Western-style liberal democracies is, in itself, utopian. But today, Pakistanis have defied pre-election expectations and fought for democracy on their own terms, doing so with no help from the West. So even if Khan is not enthusiastic to be a Western ally in the sense that Pakistan's military has committed to be, he still represents the democratic will of the Pakistani people. And therefore, with Imran Khan, the West must deal, if not tomorrow, then in the foreseeable future.



**A portrait of former PM Imran Khan is seen amid flags of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the religious political party Jamat-e-Islami (JI), as supporters attended a joint protest demanding free and fair results of the elections in Karachi, Pakistan on February 10, 2024.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

people in Pakistan perceive alleged Western foreign interference, which directly contributes to perpetuating a cycle where neither democracy is allowed to flourish nor the economy is permitted to escape being held hostage by a group of self-serving elites. The Pakistani media cautiously refers to this group as "the establishment," avoiding direct mention of the army due to fears of persecution.

The most recent case of such interference can be traced back to the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan. Controversies surrounding the contents of a diplomatic cipher—a secret cable—alleging efforts by the Biden administration to oust Khan from office are widely believed to be true in Pakistan. Khan attributed his April 2022 dismissal from office to this cipher, suggesting it was part of a coordinated effort by the United States, his political opponents, and

following a successful no-confidence vote, spurred by concerns about his visit to Moscow at the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. Conversely, a failure to remove Khan could result in backlash from Washington. A month after this discussion was reportedly documented and shared, a no-confidence vote in parliament led to Khan's ousting.

A narrative has emerged: the Biden administration advised the army to ensure that Khan is toppled by them in cahoots with his rivals via a constitutionally acceptable process. This is viewed as a mere episode in a broader tale of a series of coups since the Cold War era, endorsed by the US. The unintended outcome is that Pakistani youth have become even more supportive of Khan and critical of Western influence over the military in deposing elected governments. Washington has denied these allegations. While not a

West is surely to blame for creating an image of itself as a dominator rather than a democratic partner to the Pakistani people. The recent election has certainly served as a critique of the West.

Under Imran Khan's leadership, Pakistan chose non-alignment in response to Washington's calls to condemn Vladimir Putin, motivated by a desire to maintain strategic ambivalence in the Russia-Ukraine war. This approach, aimed at securing assistance—via bilateral deals with Russia—was essential for meeting Pakistan's energy and food security needs. This stance also enjoys support among many Pakistanis. Perhaps it is logical for them to believe that strategic neutrality should form the core of Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistanis believe that the West, led by the US, has either caused turmoil in the region or aided and abetted it—particularly in neighbouring

## RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN BANGLADESH

# Reassuring stories of progress

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**SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ**

People living along the road from Garments Bazar to Boideshirhat in Chirirbandar upazila, Dinajpur were fed up. Road repairs, which began in 2018, had been going on for five years. So, in June 2023, a group of right to information (RTI) activists from the region decided to use the RTI process to try and resolve the inconvenience caused to local residents. Naushad Hossain and a number of his colleagues submitted separate RTI requests to the designated officer (DO) of the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) in Dinajpur. They asked, inter alia, for information including the budget and time frame for the road construction project, the reasons for the delay and the measures taken—if any—to alleviate inconvenience for residents, and to penalise the contractor and government officials involved for their role in the delay. They also wanted to know if and how the public was kept informed.

The RTI law stipulates a time frame for responses to such queries, and Naushad received only partial information within this period, so he launched an appeal to the higher authority of the LGED office. Receiving no response, he filed a complaint to the Information Commission (IC). At its hearing on December 18, 2023, the commission noted the discrepancies between the information sought by Naushad and those provided in the partial disclosure by the DO. The DO was duly reprimanded by the IC and starkly reminded that, as he drew

his salary from public funds, he was accountable to the public. The IC further imposed a fine of Tk 3,000 on the DO and instructed him to provide full information within 10 days.

Most importantly, Naushad and the local population were heartened by the sight of the road repair work resuming immediately, with increased manpower. This made people appreciate the potential of the RTI law and its efficacy.

Although the RTI Act, 2009 has been around for some 14 years, its use is not widespread. The law has been kept alive over the years largely through the efforts of a few dedicated NGOs and die-hard RTI activists. Stories such as the one above illustrate the kind of issues propelling citizens to resort to the law for corrective government measures. They also indicate a better understanding about the law's transformative objectives.

Our second story relates to the travails of Mainuddin Islam Sumon of Dinajpur Sadar upazila. A bookseller who bought books from wholesalers and sold them to retail purchasers, Sumon noticed that Dinajpur wholesalers, who received a sizable commission on their purchase from publishers, did not provide much discount to retail sellers, while wholesalers in the neighbouring districts did so. So, Sumon began buying books in bulk from nearby districts and selling them to retail purchasers in Dinajpur, offering higher discounts. As more customers

were drawn to his shop, the Bookseller Samity in Dinajpur was enraged. As part of a harassment campaign, they sought to block Sumon's application for membership in the Dinajpur committee, demanding a hefty fee and instigating other booksellers to

requisite fees for new members of the Bookseller Samity, the amount collected between 2017-2023, and where they were deposited.

Upon receiving his request, the ADC office in Dinajpur advised Sumon to submit the same request to the

illegal practices of the booksellers' syndicate and contributing to more transparent interactions between wholesalers and retailers. A sense of victory permeated the local RTI community.

The third story concerns alleged



VISUAL: FREEPIK

shun him.

A distraught Sumon discussed his problem with local RTI activists and submitted RTI requests to three authorities: the office of the Additional District Commissioner (Library, Media & Publication) of Dinajpur; the secretary of the Ministry of Commerce; and the president of the Bookseller Samity, Dhaka (which is registered with the government). He asked to know the

president of the Dinajpur Bookseller Samity as well, which he did. Soon thereafter, the president of the Dhaka committee contacted Sumon to learn more about his concerns. Upon his intervention, Sumon soon received the requested information and learnt that there was a fixed membership fee of Tk 800 only and clear-cut rules for wholesale book purchasers regarding offering discounts. The news spread quickly in the region, revealing the

malpractices and fraudulent activities of the land settlement office in Dinajpur's Nawabganj upazila. Jamaluddin, a local RTI activist, was approached by a man named Mofazzel Hossain who claimed to be a victim of such corruption. After mutual discussion, Jamaluddin submitted an RTI application on August 16, 2023 seeking information on the processes of land transfer and recording of land ownership. In particular, he wanted

to know the status of the land owned by Mofazzel Hossain, for which the latter had proof of ownership.

Receiving no response to his application, Jamaluddin filed an appeal on September 14, 2023 to the deputy secretary (for zonal settlement) of Dinajpur. A hearing was fixed for October 3, 2023; after listening to both parties and consulting relevant documents, the appellate authority not only instructed the DO to provide the requested information but also initiated an investigation into the recording practices of the land office. A mobile court was established to identify the brokers who worked at the Nawabganj settlement office.

These stories indicate growing maturity, however tentative, of both the demand and supply sides of the RTI regime in Bangladesh. As citizens learn to use the law to address collective concerns of local communities and of society at large, public officials too are realising that they must change their age-old practice of official secrecy and instead cater to the growing public interest of transparency and accountability in their work.

Of late, the Information Commission of Bangladesh has begun to display greater maturity and better understanding of their role in promoting proper implementation of the law, which is clearly the most potent instrument in the hands of citizens to check the work of government and other public bodies. To sustain progress, there is a need for greater and more continuous use of the RTI Act by citizens from all walks of life. Only citizens' groups can take the lead and keep the ball rolling through individual and collective efforts. A supportive government has much to gain in return.