

## DISCUSSION PAPER

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# Pakistan Elections 2018: An Analysis of Trends, Recurring Themes and Possible Political Scenarios

### Abstract

*Politics in Pakistan like many developing societies is confrontational, personalized and acrimonious, yet electoral contestations provides an opportunity for resolving divides through bargain, compromise and consensus. On 25<sup>th</sup> July 2018 Pakistani voters will be choosing new national and provincial assemblies for the next five years. Forecasting electoral outcomes is hazardous, yet this paper ventures to provide an appraisal of some key issues, current trends, and recurring themes and based on an analysis of limited data and survey of literature and news reports presents a few scenarios about the potential losers and winners in the forthcoming elections.*

### Introduction and Context:

This paper is divided into five parts and draws attention towards key issues that are steering the elections 2018. First, Identifying the current trends, it sheds some light on 2013 elections and how the Census 2017 and youth bulge could influence the outcome of 2018 elections. Second, it highlights the revitalization of Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and how it would test its ability to hold free and fair elections. Third, it focuses on the confrontational politics of Sharif Family and PML-N and how the opposition political parties and the military is responding to it and that could set new parameters for civil-military relations in the post election phase. Fourth, it dwells on the role media and social media could play in shaping the electioneering and outcome of the elections. Finally, it forecasts on what could be electoral outcomes for the major political parties. It also explores how a surge in terrorist acts during the coming two weeks could derail the elections in the country. In the past one week four terrorist attacks in KPK and Balochistan have led to the killing of two party candidates and over 100 deaths and more than 200 injuries. These terrorist acts/suicide bombings add an element of un-predictability. I argue that despite some of these uncertainties, in the 2018 elections, the ECP, the political parties, the

military and the media could play a decisive role in shaping the future of democracy and re-drawing the parameters of civil-military relations in the country. We allude to those as possible political scenarios.

On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018, about 104 million<sup>1</sup> Pakistani voters will go to the 12<sup>th</sup> General Elections to elect the next Parliament at national and provincial levels. The political situation in the country is contentious and the political parties and some of the political leaders have adopted a confrontational path yet the ECP, fulfilling its constitutional obligation is moving ahead for holding general elections. Anticipating 2018 elections, six observations are pertinent; first, it can be argued that if the military has ruled the country for over thirty years and the civilian elected party led governments have also been in power-although, sporadically for almost thirty years, yet widespread speculation is that Intelligence Agencies continue to play a larger than life role in steering politics; second with the revival and restitution of ECP as an autonomous entity, the electoral laws and procedures have become transparent, consensus driven and enforceable. Third, international media, observation groups are actively monitoring and reporting on electoral processes in Pakistan. Foreign and domestic reporting on the election 2018 is robust; critical of military's role and insightful and perceptive on public meetings and leadership activities. It merits attention that in the past two months international media and regional press (The Economist, Times of India, Economist Intelligence Unit report on Pakistan, BBC, DW, Telegraph, Reuter etc.) have been asserting that the PML-N continues to have popular support base and would be a winner in the coming elections.

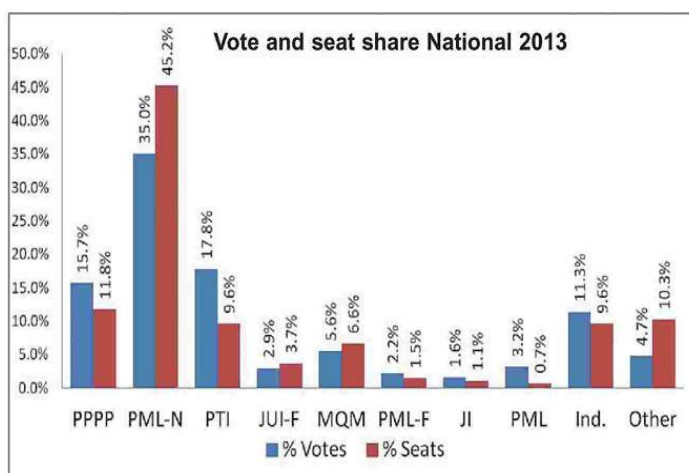
Fourth, although two successive civilian parties led governments have completed their full tenure terms and transfer of power has been peaceful and smooth (2008-2018) yet, none of the elected governments have had successive two terms. Despite, completion of terms both had their prime ministers removed by the Supreme Court of Pakistan on charges of corruption and misuse of power. Fifth, despite regularity of elections and considerable improvement in electoral laws, making elections transparent, fair and equal opportunity process, the political parties continue to question the legitimacy of electoral process, thus making the conducting of the elections a daunting task for the ECP. For example, since the removal of Nawaz Sharif, as prime minister in July 2017 by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the PML-N has been challenging the fairness and evenhandedness of electoral process, thus casting aspersions on the competence and legitimacy of ECP to hold fair and free elections. Sixth, the elections will be held under the newly created Election Act 2017; empowered by this Act, would ECP be able to exercise its authority effectively?

## **2. Elections 2013: Politics of Protest, Terrorism and Judicial Response**

The 2013 General Elections are noteworthy for several reasons: The voter turnout was around 55.02%, highest since 1980, as 46.3 million cast their votes; the PML-N, the PTI and the PPP emerged as the largest political parties; the election results regionalized the parties, none of them could claim national representation. The PML-N secured 14.8 million votes and emerged as the largest party, the Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI), emerged as the second largest party, securing 7.6 million votes. (See Graph 1.)

Being the majority party in Punjab, the PML-N became the largest national party and ventured to establish the dominance of PML-N. It made little effort to co-opt or seek support of the other parties; and largely tried to roll back the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment initiatives. In Sindh the PPPP dominated rural Sindh while MQM urban areas, particularly Karachi – the power struggle between the two kept the province poorly governed and debilitating economic growth and development. The PTI emerged as challenger to PML-N dominance in Punjab, while it swept Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The Pakhtun and Baloch nationalist parties made a strong comeback in Balochistan. Among the religious parties, JUI – (far from the overwhelming performance of MMA in 2002) – secured significant votes and seats in both Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

By most accounts 2013 elections were hotly contested. According to a FAFEN, election report a total of 4,462 contestants vied for the 266



constituencies. The PTI fielded the highest number of candidates, competing from 230 constituencies, followed by PPPP (227), PML-N (215) and MQM (207). Independent candidates constituted the largest group with 2,343 while other parties fielded a total of 1,240 candidates cumulatively.<sup>ii</sup> The high voter turnout and contestant participation rate also exposed the limited capacity of the ECP to hold fair and free elections, thus raising allegations of rigging and poor enforcement of electoral laws.

It is ironic and unfortunate that despite increase in the regularity of elections and considerable improvement in electoral laws and procedures, the political parties have continued to cast aspersions on the degree of 'fairness and freeness' of the elections. The case of 2013 was not different, despite wider acceptance by most political parties. The PTI was quick to recourse to politics of agitation and protest, its supporters staged sit-ins in Lahore and Karachi voicing rigging and demanding probe, which led to an unprecedented Dharna-- a sit-in of 126 days in Islamabad. The PTI was vociferous in center-staging the issue of selected rigging by the PML-N and demanded probe; the other parties also joined the chorus slowly but with lesser fervor. Independent 'observers' and media reports<sup>iii</sup> also corroborated the doubts as FAFEN in its report National Assembly Election Result Analysis 2013<sup>iv</sup> pointed at the discrepancies; "The distribution of constituencies showing voter discrepancy is significantly skewed across the regions with Punjab leading with 57 of the 93 NA constituencies showing a difference of voters between the final polling scheme and result Form XVII" and "the disproportionate and significant increase in the number of rejected votes emerged as one of the major discrepancy – the number increasing from 775,720 in 2002

to 973,694 in 2008 and further increasing to 1,502,717 in 2013 – an increase of 64% compared to 2008 elections.”

While the PTI protests were still continuing, a horrendous terrorist attack on Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16, 2014 shook the conscience of the nation; the PTI had to call of its Dharna as a result of this unfortunate incident. On the positive side, the government accepted the PTI’s demand to form a Judicial Commission to probe into election rigging on the mutually agreed Terms of Reference. A three member judicial commission, headed by Chief Justice Nasir-ul-Mulk, was constituted. The Commission held 39 sittings and completed the hearing on July 3, 2015. It recorded testimonies of 69 witnesses, including politicians, government and judicial officers and journalists. The Commission in its 237-page report stated that despite some lapses on part of the ECP; “the 2013 general elections were in large part organized and conducted fairly and in accordance with the law.” It continued therefore, *“The commission is of the view that the PTI was not entirely unjustified in requesting the establishment of body to inquire into its suspicions and allegations regarding the 2013 general elections,”* and *“based on the evidence presented before the commission it cannot be said that on an overall basis the elections were not a true and fair reflection of the mandate given by the electorate, despite some lapses by the Election Commission of Pakistan.”* Based on this judicial Commission’ inquiry and report, analysts and media opined that the Judicial Commission has exposed anomalies in the system and ECP<sup>v</sup> and that calls for electoral reforms and enhancing the powers of ECP.

### 3. Electoral Reforms and Strengthening of ECP:

The Judicial Commission report led the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan to form a Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform. This committee and its sub-committee conducted 119 meetings altogether, heard civil society organizations<sup>vi</sup>, met with experts and drafted a new election law, which was enacted by Parliament on October 2, 2017 as Election Act 2017<sup>vii</sup>. The eight laws which were consolidated in the Election Act 2017 of the parliament include Electoral Rolls Act 1974, Delimitation of Constituencies Act 1974, Senate Election Act 1975; Representation of the People Act 1976, Election Commission Order 2002, Conduct of General Elections Order 2002, Political Parties Order 2002 and Allocation of Symbols Order 2002. The 18<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments have further enhanced the powers of the ECP.

The new law provided greater autonomy and strengthened the non-partisan and independent status of the ECP. Simultaneously, introducing important transparency and accountability provisions; it formalizes use of citizens registry data for creating electoral rolls and simplifies voters’ registration; improves measures for poll counting and tabulation of results; and it includes guarantees to make sure that constituencies have more or less the same number of voters so that the vote of each Pakistani counts equally. It is noteworthy to mention that the Election Act 2017 authorized the ECP to regulate political parties in Pakistan. Operationalizing the Act, the ECP reduced the number of political parties from 352 to

110<sup>viii</sup>; under Section 202(5) of Elections Act; it cancelled the membership of political parties, which, failed to comply with the provisions of the law.

Successful implementation of the Election Act 2017 requires secondary legislation, the review of administrative practices and guidelines, and the training of election officials. To this end, the new law mandates the ECP to develop comprehensive administrative regulations and solicit public inputs – an unprecedented move in Pakistan’s electoral history, which has significant potential to strengthen electoral procedures. The ECP took an important step in fulfilling its new responsibilities by publishing draft election rules for public comment in October 2017. The Election Rules 2017, since approved, address key issues of the electoral process; voter registration, the management of electoral rolls, postal voting, and delimitation. Furthermore, the ECP has the powers of the High Court for specific directions, administrative powers to control transfer of election officials and disciplinary action against them, full financial powers and powers to make rules without prior approval of the President.

Despite these positive changes the Election Act 2017 continues to have several limitations as well; for example, the disreputable, vague and subjective candidacy criterion, which has once again come under public discourse after disqualification of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Even some of the newly introduced provisions are in conflict with the spirit of transparency and the right of citizens to participate in elections. For example, the requirement for national observers to get security clearance or maintaining a separate voters list for the Ahmadiya community.

Now, at least the Election Act 2017 sets the directions and provides a comprehensive framework to address the issues of transparency and fairness. Challenges continue to persist and require improvements in areas such as; scrutiny of candidates, monitoring of expenses in election campaign, ballot and election security. Still, some of the rules could be reviewed and formalized prior to the next elections.<sup>ix</sup>

Overall, Election Act 2017 is good news for Pakistani elections<sup>x</sup> and the electorate. Given these improvements, there is reason to be optimistic that the 2018 elections would be free and fair and that the political parties having learnt from the previous experiences will show greater signs of political maturity. The conduct and behavior of political parties, their leadership and supporters during the campaign and following the elections would determine the quality and content of democracy and in remodeling the parameters of civil-military relations in Pakistan.

#### **4. Census 2017 and Constituency Redesigning**

The Census 2017 results are still provisional, yet it is good news and enhances provincial representation and clearly shows youth potential of Pakistan. As a result of 6<sup>th</sup> Population Census’s provisional results and enactment of 24th Constitutional amendment the number of seats in the National Assembly is re-allocated to the provinces, the federal capital, and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

According to the new delimitation list, the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) will now have three constituencies; Punjab 141; Sindh 61; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) 39; Balochistan 16. Similarly, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) will have 12 constituencies, an increase of two seats, in the National Assembly. It has been divided into 12 territorial constituencies on the basis of population census as it has been allocated 12 seats under article 51(3) of the Constitution. Overall KP made the most from the new delimitation as its share has gone up from 35 to 39 seats. Similarly, Balochistan secured two more seats, increasing its tally from 14 to 16 seats, whereas the federal capital added one to its current two seats. This will have an implication in the forthcoming elections, some politicians may not find their constituencies intact, others will have scattered constituencies, and also redefining constituency boundaries will change the voters' status as well. Population divided by the number of seats has determined the quota per seat in the NA. For instance, the KP population is now 30 million and it has 39 seats; therefore, the total population on one seat would be 782,651, which is double than the previous number. The delimitation plan increased the size of voters and constituency; besides the so called, 'electable candidates', this would be an additional factor influencing the political parties to award ticket to those candidates, who have the means and capacity to get elected.

## 5. Youth Bulge and Elections 2018

The recent report, National Human Development Report of Pakistan by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Pakistan points out that **country has the largest percentage of young people –i.e., 64% of its population is below 30 years of age.** Quoting National Youth Perception Survey, the report claims that only 24 per cent of youth expressed trust in politicians. However, approximately 90 per cent male and 55 percent female expressed their intention to vote in the 2018 general elections.<sup>xi</sup> During October-December 2016, the ECP updated electoral rolls and 4.20 million new voters were registered. According to updated voters' List, **young people constitute 44pc of all registered voters and this could increase upto 47pc as the result of 2017 Census is made public, which means that their active participation in the electoral process could have a significant impact on election outcome.**

There is a growing realization among the political parties that participation of youth in electoral politics is imperative. , The growth must be inclusive, and that is only possible when the youth has confidence, opportunity and gets mobilized to participate in the electoral process. Both, PTI and PML-N are focusing to mobilize youth and engaging them, PPP and other parties are following the trend. While in power the PML-N initiated several Youth attracting schemes, such as Laptop, youth internship, Prime Minister Youth Loan etc. On the other hand, PTI demonstrated its commitment by giving a few tickets to the young members for NA and Senate elections. The PPP is equally active to engage youth in Sindh. **A generational shift in dynastic politics is also visible as increasingly the younger members of the political families, who in many cases are better educated and appear more focused are joining the political parties. This could become a harbinger of change in our electoral politics and developmental goals.**

## 6. Elections 2018: What is Different?

**Here is how Election 2018 is significantly different; the political landscape is fractious and accusatory and tainted by the unending judicial battles.** This time the election campaign is being driven by scandals (Panama leaks), corruption, and impact of mega projects, poor governance. The Panama leaks opened up a Pandora-box that blemished other parties as well included disqualification of Jahngir Tareen from PTI and other politicians; several cases are under investigation against politicians, bureaucrats, and army officials by NAB and the Supreme Court. After the dismissal of Nawaz Sharif as prime minister the PML-N has become an aggrieved party and is challenging the legitimacy and impartiality of the ECP. For Nawaz Sharif and family, 2018 election is a battle of survival as a political dynasty and could cause dissensions within the PML-N; concurrently, Shahbaz Sharif, the former chief minister Punjab has been battling different kind of multiple legal cases of mis-governance and corruption; such as, formation and functioning of 56 private sector companies, mega power projects, Orange Train, above all bloodbath of the unarmed civilians in Model Town.

**The PPP also carries baggage of corrupt ministers and bureaucrats in Sindh government, which could affect the party's performance in the 2018 elections. On the other hand, the PTI by center-staging corruption and mis-governance has challenged the legitimacy of PML-N and the PPP to govern and lead. The Panama leaks outcome has energized the PTI and it is persisting with anti-corruption issue in its electoral campaign.**

The politics of accusations and counter-accusations have deepened the cleavages among the political parties, undermining the very spirit of government-opposition relationship and democracy and representative government. This acrimonious relationship among the political parties affected their ability to build consensus on the formation of interim/care taker government and the ECP had to announce the formation of interim governments. The behavior and conduct of political parties remains undemocratic and does not rouse much public confidence in their will and capacity to sustain democracy.

## 7. Role of the Military and Intelligence Agencies in Politics

Electoral history of Pakistan reveals that each election elicits the demand about disengaging, curbing and if possible eliminating the role of military from politics. However, political leaders and political parties find it difficult to build consensus on how to limit the role of military because most of the politicians (including Nawaz Sharif Family) are products of the military establishment. Thus, **outcome of each election has invariably resulted in a proportional increase and entrenchment of military in the political system – a common perception. Scholars and objective policy analysts now widely recognize that Pakistan military has become skillful, savvy and found nuanced ways to influence political process and retain its hegemony in the political system through multiple implicit ways.** It is vigorous, watchful and tenacious in protecting its institutional autonomy and in pursuing its interests. Shamila N. Chaudhary has perceptively observed that the military has found indirect ways, because: “The combination of internal leadership and ideological challenges, lack of public support for elections

interference, and intense scrutiny by the international community will simply force the military to pursue more indirect means to influence the elections process<sup>xii</sup>. She further argues to rationalize this role “the obsessive speculation also suggests a deep-seated expectation in Pakistani culture for the military to come to the country’s rescue from a corrupt, inefficient government, even at the expense of democracy.” **This could make the 2018 elections different from earlier elections that the military is cognizant that domestic and external monitors are vigilantly watching military’s role in the electoral process. Yet, it is this ‘obsessive speculation’ that the military and its Intelligence Agencies continue to enjoy enormous power in influencing the electoral process. Since 1988, in almost each election accusations of Intelligence agencies involvement in manipulating the elections outcome continues to persist. While, we are amidst the 2018 elections, the speculation and perception of Intelligence Agencies overbearing role in trying to influence the elections persists.**

And that whatever the shape of new government following the 2018 elections, the civilian government would have limited control over key national security issues, such as; relations with India, Afghanistan, nuclear weapons, and even relations with the United States would be steered by the military.<sup>xiii</sup>

The alternative view though is that the 2018 elections are different; manipulation of election results by intelligence agencies would be difficult. The Army Chiefs and the ISPR continue to reiterate that the military fully support free, fair and timely elections in the country. We have been supporting the present political set-up during the last five years and will ensure that the elections are not delayed.<sup>xiv</sup> On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the DG, ISPR held a wide-ranging press conference to dispel this perception; vigorously defending the neutrality of the military in electoral process and insisting that the military’s task is to assist elected government and provide any and all support if and when required by the public representatives—a constitutional obligation that the military must fulfill.<sup>xv</sup> **More importantly, given the media’s self-assumed role as a perpetual watchdog, robust and refurbished ECP, international monitoring and enthused voters constrain the prospects of any rigging.**

## **8. Money and Media Power:**

In Pakistan, State’s resources have been used to entice, control and regulate media. Over the decades contesting elections and building democracy has become an expensive proposition. In the recent four by-elections -- it is the money, not ideology or performance that has made all the differences (including NA-122 & 120 in Lahore, 154 Lodhran and 144 Okara) held in Punjab. The code of conduct was adopted; it did put a limit on election expense, and the presence of ECP monitoring teams were visible; yet the amount of money spent in these elections was stunning. The ECP could not act and enforce spending limits, it failed to perform. Recognizing its failure the ECP revised the amount for election expense and has allowed candidates for National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies spend upto Rs. 4 million and Rs. 2 million respectively. **Observing the spending in bye-elections by all parties, it seems like a Herculean task that the ECP would succeed in ensuring compliance. Use of money appallingly affect the political system and can still have a critical influence on legislative outcomes, even if it doesn’t actually have**



**an outside impact on election outcomes. The political parties and the candidates need to show greater spirit of compliance and abiding by the rules on electoral spending, it has to be a two way process and not simply the responsibility of the ECP.**

Globally and locally responsible media has become a key player in shaping public opinion, mobilizing voters and transforming the fortunes of political parties in democratic systems. **The election campaign 2018 has four visible components; public meetings, which are glittered with party banners and posters, second, newspaper advertisements and posters, third electronic media advertisements, which are being splashed on television channels as ‘Paid Content’ and finally social media campaigns. Increasingly in Pakistan, the election electioneering is being designed and driven by the media experts.** The election campaigns of the three largest political parties Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz, Pakistan People's Party, and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in the general elections 2013 were prudently analyzed in the print media to comprehend the political marketing trends in Pakistan. It was found out that that the three parties largely employed mutually exclusive strategies in order to garner the support of the electorate. The success ratio of the political parties in the general elections 2013 signifies the importance of certain advertising appeals, advertising themes, and aggressively attacking the opponents. The study also questioned the veracity of the chimerical claims made in the advertisements.<sup>xvi</sup>

In Pakistan, the media plays an important role in the campaign and election processes, yet the data on how this money is raised and spent is scanty and scattered. According to Media Bank report all parties spent Rs. 781.4 million in 2013 elections as compared to Rs. 227.8 million to advertise and campaign on electronic media for 94351 minutes in 2013 and 16281 minutes in 2008.<sup>xvii</sup> If one added the cost of print media advertisement it would be around a billion plus rupee game, which will increase in 2018. How this massive spending could affect the objectivity of reporters and anchorpersons? Or journalistic ethics are questions that need further research. **While holding the 2018 elections, its campaigns on electronic and print media the ECP need to ensure that the spending limits imposed by it are abided by and the candidates and the political parties agree to comply.**

### **9. Social Media and Campaign 2018:**

**A distinctive feature of 2018 election is the usage and power of social media. Youth, social media and designing of political messaging are changing the nature of electioneering in the country. These include the use of texting/SMS through widespread cell phone use even in rural areas, smart phone use predominantly in urban areas, and either private or internet café-based on-line platform access (social media networks).** It has changed the political landscape in Pakistan and has become a vital factor in political campaigns. Candidates and their supporters constantly post their views on Facebook and Twitter. Each party has its own pages, from which it broadcasts propaganda, creates opinion, share information, and extends invitation, live streaming, and requests for donations. The social media is going to be the most effective tool for up-coming election campaigns with its the supporters of different

political parties using applications like Facebook and Twitter, YouTube etc. PML-N established a large social media group and using twitter and Facebook extensively, also organized several social media conventions in all over Punjab. A report aired by a private news channel said, social media platforms provide new ways to stimulate citizen engagement in political life, where elections and electoral campaigns have a central role. Yet the most intense political campaigning had not started on the streets. Instead, **WhatsApp has about 30 million plus users in Pakistan, messaging through WhatsApp are increasingly playing a critical role. More than any other social media or messaging app, the Pakistani political parties, religious groups and civil society activists have been using WhatsApp for campaigning and sending their messages across. It connects political leadership with its voters, supporters, and volunteers; also serves as a platform for media coverage because journalists and channels do want to report and track the activities of the political parties. The TV channels have gone one step farther, they invite citizens to upload their messages for instant rely on TV channels websites.**

## 10. Coalition Dynamics

In parliamentary democracies coalition making, coalition breaking and sustaining coalitions is complex and intricate process. Some political leaders are canny and crafty and thrive on it (Nawzada Nasar Ullah was one such leader). In post-1971 period, political parties have ventured to build coalitions but sustaining these has been tough. Witnessing campaigns for 2018 elections coalition politics appears in a state of flux in the country. **In my assessment the three major political parties, PML-N, PPP and PTI, all are unlikely to retain the number of seats they hold in the national and provincial assemblies, they would lose some. According the list issued by the ECP, 540 candidates have filed as Independents in Punjab alone. This implies that almost in all the major parties, defections have occurred:** the PML-N, PPP, PTI have lost some 'electable' leaders. The PTI would try to maximize its numbers in Punjab; the PPP would also try to enhance its seats, while the PML-N would struggle to retain what it has. The PML-N would continue to keep alliance with the right wing, nationalist, and other small parties in Balochistan and KP, which were its partner in the government.

The PTI leadership has already made clear that it would not form any coalition except in Sindh, where it could woo GDA to join, however; small parties and groups would decide to join any party after assessing who is gaining momentum. The PML-Q, PAT, Sunni Ittehad, and Ahle Sunnat Jammāt would be negotiating for joint election campaign and seat adjustments. The PPP most likely would retain its dominance in Sindh and make limited inroads in the KP, Punjab and Balochistan. Thus, it would endeavor to woo independents and make coalition with PML-Q.

## 11. Revival of MMA and the Emergence of New Religious Parties:

Muthida Majlis-e-Ammal (MMA), a coalition of religious political parties, has been revived; though MMA was created and brought to power in 2002 to sideline the mainstream political parties. It was largely confined to KP and had limited role and impact. In the 2013 elections, the religious parties were unable to get significant number of seats at national and provincial level except in KP, where JI shared provincial government with PTI. In Pakistani politics, it is generally acknowledged that the religious groups are

potent social and cultural force; the religious political parties try to capitalize on it but have met little success. **The new religious groups are posing a challenge to the established religious political parties, the Jamaat Islami, Jamiat Ulema Islam (F). The new religious groups have emerged largely in response to religious extremism and specific terrorist acts. The Tehreek Labayk Ya Rasollallah and Hafiz Saeed's Milli Muslim League supporting Allah-o-Akbar became political contestants in the bye-elections of NA-120 earlier this year. It would of interest to watch how influential their presence would be in the 2018 elections.**

Given these constraints, challenges, limitations and opportunities let me dwell on a few possible scenarios.

### **Scenario I: Elections 2018 Will Not Take Place?**

Empowered with the Election Act 2017, the ECP started preparations for election 2018, updating the voters' lists, new delimitation scheme finalization, (which has been challenged in the apex courts), and by completion of election staff training. As noted earlier the PML-N leadership has opted to pursue a politics of defiance; insinuating military's interference in the elections and judiciary for colluding against the PML-N and by making the entire electoral process dubious and jaundiced towards PML-N. Let us recognize that personalization of power has become a dominant reality in Pakistani decision-making and politics. Personalization of power evokes personality-centric hostility and Sharif is no different. Personalization of power sometimes promotes the notion of indispensability of a particular leader. The PML-N has chosen to build its electoral and social media campaign promoting cult and indispensability surrounding Nawaz Sharif as defender of democracy. The PML-N and Sharif family has been in power in one way or other since 1981. During the 1980's and early 1990's Nawaz Sharif introduced 'Lafafa Journalism' (paying journalists for writing favorable story) so the PML-N and its leadership is well versed in conducting an election campaign with its 3M approach (Money, Media, and Management). It has developed the art of spending money through investors, optimal use of media national and international, cultivating the rich and influential groups and patronizing a class of loyal administrators. Thus, the PML-N has the capability to run an effective election campaign and this is very well reflected in how they have handled the conviction cases against its leadership. However, the confrontational path that the PML-N has launched against the institutions, devoid of consensus among political parties, it could spiral out of control and jeopardize the elections and may disrupt the elections.

### **Scenario 2: Race For Elections 2018, Who Will Cross the Finish Line?**

How Political Parties are strategizing their electoral campaigns? Political parties are using social media; television programs, party manifestoes, poster campaigns, newspaper advertisements and the candidates are also reaching out to voters by visiting their constituencies. What is unusual and somewhat shocking in the 2018 election campaign is that on social media and in the constituencies the voters are showing anger, aggressively challenging the party leaders and asking tough questions on what would the party do for the voters. Elections 2018 would be held in the midst of political turmoil, strict

accountability, pulsating judicial process, delimitation of constituencies, and media thumping. Each political party is devising ways and developing strategies, whereby they can sell their narrative to the voter, through promises by choosing 'electable candidates', making alliances, coalition partners and even accusations on personal life of candidates. In this sense the political behavior of political parties manifested through the election campaign is nasty, brutal and vindictive, thus curbing and managing political violence would be a challenge for the ECP and Interim Governments.

As of now about **70 plus political parties would participate in the election 2018 but the real contest would be in about 10-15 political parties and of course a significant number of Independent candidates.** In Punjab PML-N and PTI will be the main contenders; PPP and other parties will not secure high number of NA seats, independents would be a potent force. Sindh would remain a forte of the PPP; it could win more seats from the interior and grab a few in urban centers like Karachi and Hyderabad. GDA could emerge as a challenge for the PPP along with MQM factions, PSP and other small parties in urban areas of Sindh. In KP, the PTI most likely would be able to sustain itself, however, recent killing of a popular ANP leader, Haroon Bilour could create a sympathy wave and weaken PTI voter support base. The MMA would retain its traditional control in southern districts of KP. While the ANP, QWP-S and PPP could do seat adjustments in central KP. The PML-N would be a potent force in Hazara region. Balochistan Awami Party has been launched, which would affect the traditional parties but PMAP, NP, and BNP would most likely be able to preserve their constituency seats. **The real battle would be in Punjab; wrestling it away from PML-N has begun, Punjab has the largest number of seats (141) and each major party would mobilize all its resources to make a dent here. Whichever political party and socio-political forces overwhelm Punjab will rule Pakistan!**

### **Scenario 3: Forecasting Party Position, Everyone is a Winner, Yet a Divided House:**

Given this fractious, unsavory and obsessively speculative political environment what possible outcomes could be projected? Nawaz Sahrif's return from London, the Sharif family's victimhood narrative combined with defiant and stubborn leadership posture and effective electronic and social media campaign could create law and order situation, which may disrupt or delay elections? Could politics of defiance and victimhood create a popular support surge for Nawaz Sharif and PML-N to the possibility of a 'heavy mandate'? How would the PTI and PPP and other political parties respond to such an eventuality? Besides the numbers game what kind of coalition of parties or a party's government should we expect? These are critical questions and a plausible answer is not easy but a realistic would be a desirable goal.

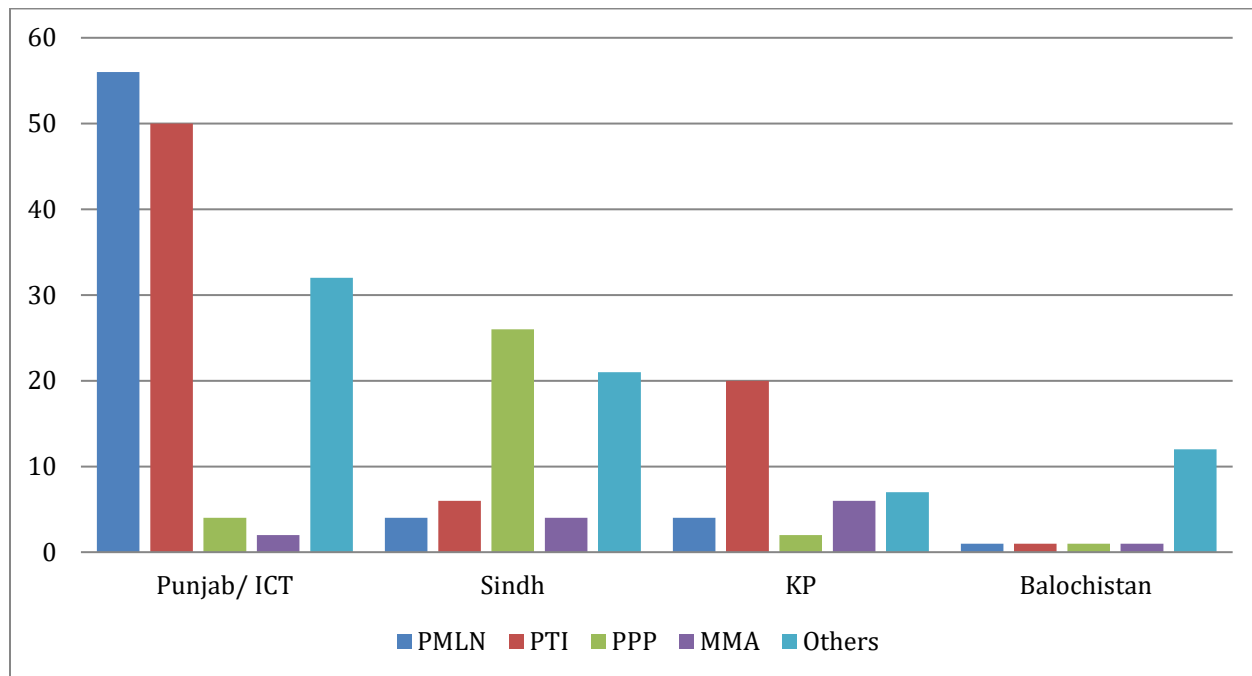
Nonetheless, the emergence of the PTI at the national level for a party that had little or no representation in the last two elections is the biggest story of Elections 2018. In terms of seats, it remains lower than the PPP but has emerged as the second biggest party at the national level if the share of votes is considered. Also, Imran Khan and PTI fastidiously pursued rigging complaints in the election 2013, took a strong position on Panama leaks and corruption, which resulted in electoral reform and strengthening of accountability in the country. It has gained a momentum and became the toughest

contender for all parties. Despite his huge urban base, Khan has found it hard to wrestle away Sharif's power base in Punjab. Among PTI's popularity the biggest challenge for the party is the opposition parties, which the PTI leadership calls as status quo parties. On the other hand the Media is full of stories against PTI leadership; some observers criticize Khan for only attacking civilian politicians and sparing the military's corruption. They also say that Khan is being "used" by the generals to destabilize the political system in the name of an anti-corruption campaign<sup>xviii</sup>. Many liberal analysts and civil society activists say the PTI's campaign against Sharif will weaken democratic structures and give the military an upper hand in governance and policy making. Despite all this, PTI's mobilization drive and political move is strengthening its position; in the last rally in Lahore Imran Khan announced 11 points agenda and 100 days plan that focuses on corruption issues, new province on administrative basis in Punjab, and vibrant economy that includes creating 10 million jobs for youth. Also, the merger of FATA in KP will be decisive and benefitting the incumbent government. This political fanfare attracted many electable and Janoobi Punjab Sooba Mahaaz (JPSM) safeguarding several constituencies in rural Punjab and some in urban cities; still PTI will lack any overwhelming number to win the elections but by getting more seats in Punjab and support from independents; it could be in a position to form the national government. It could win sizeable number of seats to form provincial government by including independents and other local parties.

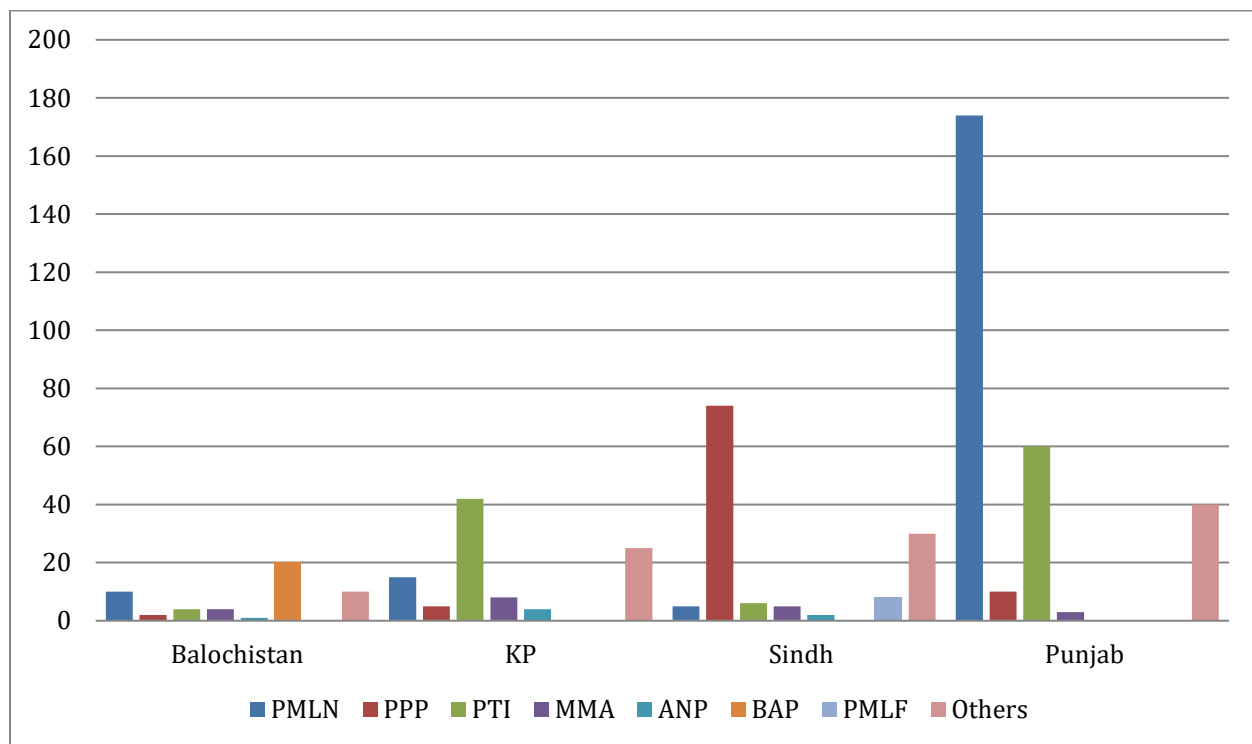
PPP is trying its level best to re-emerge in provinces other than Sindh, the data of bye-elections indicated that PPP has lost political ground in Punjab, which was a its power base not too long ago. Bilawal Bhutto is trying his level best to strengthen the party but constrained due to several reasons, most importantly Zardari's reconciliation policy and reputation as unscruples 'wheeler & dealer'. Even in Sindh, the situation is not favorable due to corruption scandals and bad governance; also some important individuals have defected to other parties or will prefer to contest independently. However, Zardari has ventured to secure more seats by fielding family members in the election. Yet, the PPP would still be able to win, enough seats in the provincial assembly to form the government. The PPP leadership has not been successful to engage electable and feudal families from southern Punjab therefore; the political space for the PPP has shrunk. Though the PML-N and the PPP leadership continue to convey the impression that the voters would reject the turncoats but political reality is different; personality, loyalty, and baradarism still matters to the voter.

Based on this appraisal and analysis of key factors above, for the National Assembly and the Provincial Assembly seats of 2018 elections, I, project that the party position could be as follows:

**Graph 2: Projected Party Positions for the National Assembly Elections 2018**



**Graph 3: Projected Party Positions for the Provincial Assemblies Elections 2018**



### Summary Conclusion:

Based on the foregoing scattered evidence, analysis and interpretations in my assessment the election 2018 is of immense significance for Pakistan and the region. It could become a 'game changer' in re-designing and strengthening the federal character of Pakistan. It could also reset the contours of civil-military relations in the country, offering an opportunity of political stability, development and security. The onus is on the political parties to provide a shared vision of representative government, reformed and democratized political parties on which the institutional foundations of civilian supremacy would be built and sustained. At this point the prospects of PML-N making a national sweep or securing 'heavy mandate' seem grim. Similarly, the likelihood of PML-N and PPP forming a coalition at the federal level also look dim, but should not be ruled out. A landslide victory of the PML-N, though unlikely but if that happens could be a major 'game changer'. As of now the chances of a hung parliament seem more likely. Such eventuality could provide PPP an opportunity to form coalition with small political parties and win over a significant number of candidates to join the coalition.

Yet another possibility could be the emergence of PTI as a majority party but not having overwhelming numbers. In such a situation PTI could form a coalition with such parties BAP, PSP, GDP, PML-Q and independents, which would be securing attractable numbers. This could lead to re-designing of power sharing in which the military grants greater space to new social groups and political forces. If we look at the provincial level, all incumbent governments would most probably retain their positions but not absolute majority. However, it could be inherently unstable and vulnerable to politics of confrontation that could also sharpen ideological cleavage and intensify elite conflict. Therefore, this demands bold, imaginative and pragmatic political leadership that relies on party system; and builds parliamentary consensus, wins the confidence of judiciary and negotiates with the military on re-defining the parameters of civil-military relations. Does, PTI, have visionary and pragmatic leadership? Does the PPP or PML-N leadership have that kind of capability and will? Does the second line of leadership among the leading political parties of 2018 hold that promise? These are tough questions and make predicating the behavior of the political parties and the future of democracy in Pakistan precarious and edgy.

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## List of Acronyms:

<b>PML-N</b>	Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)
<b>PTI</b>	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
<b>PPP</b>	Pakistan Peoples Party
<b>MQM</b>	Muttahida Qaumi Movement
<b>PSP</b>	Pak Sarzameen Party
<b>MMA</b>	Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal
<b>ANP</b>	Awami National Party
<b>QWP-S</b>	Qaumi Watan Party
<b>PMAP</b>	Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party
<b>NP</b>	National Party
<b>BNP</b>	Balochistan National Party
<b>JPSM</b>	Junoobi Punjab Suba Mahaz

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