

Pakistan's democratic revolution, with seam and swing

Imran Khan has won the general elections in Pakistan. However, he will not be able to form a government or become Prime Minister. Even though he did not contest the elections and his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was denied its election symbol on the ballot paper, his party, contesting as 'Independents', has emerged as the largest group in Parliament. It has an overwhelming majority in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and is a very close second in the largest province, Punjab. Moreover, leaders of the PTI are claiming that dozens of seats have been stolen from them and they would have won an absolute majority in Parliament and the Punjab as well. They intend to challenge these results in court over the next few days, which may see their tally rise.

This is a phenomenal victory for Pakistan's former Prime Minister who has been in jail for almost a year, has had no access to the electorate and has not participated in electioneering (his name cannot even be mentioned on television). A few days before the election, he was given three prison terms after being found guilty on charges which include corruption, getting married illegally and revealing state secrets. He has also been barred from running for public office for 10 years and has over 170 other cases against him.

The plan that failed

This was certainly not the intention nor the plan. The powers that be – what is called the 'Establishment' in Pakistan – largely the military and those who subscribe to its bidding, had worked out a very different scenario. From around November 2021, Mr. Khan and the military had a major and public falling out. Ironically, it was the military establishment that had got rid of Nawaz Sharif in 2017 and began supporting Mr. Khan when he was not yet the Prime Minister. It is widely believed – and there is ample evidence to support the claim – that the military establishment enabled Mr. Khan's victory in the 2018 elections, which made him Prime Minister.

For around three years, the military leadership and Mr. Khan were 'on the same page', a phrase which was repeated *ad nauseum* by both parties to show that the PTI government had the military's backing and was in a comfortable and safe position to complete its five-year tenure. Disagreements between the then Chief of Army



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It remains to be seen what happens after Pakistan's controversial general elections, with Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf sabotaging the establishment's plan

Staff (now retired General Bajwa) and Mr. Khan, regarding the tenure of the then and next Chief, opened up, causing huge fissures between the military and Mr. Khan. Eventually, through much manoeuvring and through a constitutional process which involved a vote of no confidence against him in April 2022 in Parliament, the PTI government was removed with all PTI elected representatives eventually resigning from Parliament. In its place, the Pakistan Democratic Movement, made up of over a dozen different parties, but led essentially by Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, or PML(N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) led by Asif Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto, formed the government which lasted until the tenure of Parliament came to an end in August 2023.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was in exile in London because he was found guilty of corruption and was banned for life for holding public office or contesting elections, was able to return to Pakistan in October 2023. Remarkably, within a few weeks, the major cases against him were overturned and he was allowed to contest the elections, receiving a complete clean sheet, and resurrected anew.

With Mr. Khan in jail, his party the PTI losing its electoral symbol, PTI candidates hounded by un-named goons while campaigning, their hustings broken, and where many were attacked and picked up in the middle of the night, the plan was to ensure that Mr. Sharif's PML(N) would win with a clear majority. He was considered a shoo-in, to become Prime Minister for the fourth time. There was complete consensus on this likelihood, yet the plan came badly undone.

The time for parleys

Despite allegations of widespread rigging – Pakistan's leading journalist Hamid Mir said on television that the "PML(N) supporters are saying that they have received more votes on 9 February than on 8 February, the day of the elections" – and numerous other impediments to there being free and fair elections, the PTI has completely sabotaged the Establishment's plan. A noticeably subdued Mr. Sharif, who was expected to make a victory speech on the day of the elections, appeared 24 hours later on television claiming victory and giving a call for a government which would include most parties, but not Imran Khan's PTI.

At the moment, there is a great deal of bargaining, negotiation and horse-trading in order to create a government in Pakistan. The PML(N) is in discussions with other parties and hopes to lead the government, especially in partnership with the PPP. On the other hand, the PPP is apparently talking to the many independents hoping to lead the government. The PTI, which does not exist as a parliamentary party at the moment, is also claiming that it will form the government which, while unlikely, is not an impossibility. The incumbent President of Pakistan, who needs to invite the 'largest party' in the new Parliament to form the government, was elected from the PTI.

There are also major players on the scene who may have their own plans. Asif Zardari might be wanting to become President again if the Prime Minister is from the PML(N). Moreover, Nawaz Sharif's daughter is being seen as the Chief Minister of Punjab, which would mean that Nawaz Sharif's brother, Shahbaz Sharif, and not Nawaz Sharif, might become Prime Minister. Then there is Bilawal Bhutto, a new, confident, aspirant for prime ministership.

The Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, has made his preferences clear, stating that "Pakistan's diverse polity and pluralism will be well-represented by a unified government of all democratic forces imbued with national purpose." It is a clear message to all the participants.

The core contradiction

The core contradiction in Pakistan's politics, as of now, is between Imran Khan and the military. Essentially, both parties are competing for the same political constituency – primarily, young supporters in the Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

In every single public survey conducted in Pakistan over the last two years, Mr. Khan has, by a huge margin, always emerged as the most popular politician and leader in Pakistan. At the same time, in each of these surveys, almost every single time, the military emerges as the 'most trusted' or popular institution in Pakistan. Given the huge contradiction between the two, the election results from last week clearly show, at least for now, who has won this last contest.

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A privileged strategic partnership, without a gulf

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to pay an official visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from February 13-14, 2024 which will include inaugurating a temple built by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha in Abu Dhabi. This is Mr. Modi's seventh visit to the UAE since 2015 and the third in the last eight months. In this short duration, India's relationship with UAE has evolved into becoming one of the most prominent bilateral relationships for New Delhi. Not only has the UAE become India's strategic partner but it has also become one of the most important linchpins of India's engagement in the Gulf region. There is a close rapport between the President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Mr. Modi.

The BAPS temple, which is built on a 27-acre plot of land donated by the UAE President, will be the second big Hindu temple to be inaugurated in the UAE in recent years, the first being the Hindu Temple in Dubai, opened in October 2022.

Mr. Modi will also address the World Government Summit on February 14 in Dubai as the 'Guest of Honour'.

The pillars of ties

The India-UAE story however goes beyond temples, faith or the signing of strategic partnerships. This special relationship was evident when the UAE President was felicitated in a road show when he was in Gandhinagar in January this year as the chief guest of the 10th Vibrant Gujarat Summit. The convergence of ideas on global climate issues too was clear when Mr. Modi was in Dubai for the COP28 climate summit. Both India and the UAE co-launched the Global Green Credit Initiative.

Another special and strong pillar is the economic partnership. Bilateral trade grew to \$85 billion in 2022-23, making the UAE India's third-largest trading partner and India's second-largest export destination. The UAE is



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Among India's strategic partnership agreements, none displays more

convergence and mutual respect at all levels than the one with the United Arab Emirates

also the fourth-largest overall investor in India. The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, signed on February 18, 2022 in a record time of 88 days, aims to increase trade in services to \$115 billion in five years. On February 1, 2024, the Indian government also approved the signing and ratification of a bilateral investment treaty with the UAE, which would significantly boost bilateral economic engagement, especially manufacturing and foreign direct investment.

Fintech is yet another area of mutual convergence. The RuPay card, a key component of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), is accepted in the UAE since August 2019, while from July 2023, the rupee was being accepted for transactions at Dubai's airports. India and the UAE also operationalised a rupee-dirham settlement system when, in August 2023, the Indian Oil Corporation made a rupee payment to the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company for crude oil imports.

Energy security

The UAE is also India's trusted partner in energy security, being the only nation from the region which has strategic oil reserves stored in India. An agreement was signed in Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd (ISPRL) and the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company to invest in the strategic crude oil storage facility in Mangaluru with an initial investment of \$400 million. Defence and security cooperation and people-to-people ties too are critical cogs in the relationship.

Both countries have often gone out of their way to make exceptions for each other. When the UAE hosted the OIC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2019, it invited India's External Affairs Minister (the late) Sushma Swaraj as a keynote speaker/guest of honour country despite protests from some nations, including Pakistan. Earlier, in 2018, India was the 'Guest of Honour' country at

the Abu Dhabi Festival (ADF), the UAE's annual cultural festival. During his visit to the UAE in August 2019, Mr. Modi was conferred the UAE's top civilian honour, the Order of Zayed. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE armed forces) was the chief guest at the Republic Day parade in Delhi in January 2017. The UAE was one of few nations specially invited for the G-20 summit, in September 2023, under India's G-20 presidency. The IIT Delhi Abu Dhabi campus has been established, and the UAE opened a consulate in Hyderabad in June 2023.

Strategic ties

Within the region, both countries are in close coordination and a part of a number of important groupings such as the I2U2 or the West Asian Quad comprising India, Israel, the United States and the UAE. The UAE is also part of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) infrastructure project that was signed during the G-20 summit in Delhi. The corridor aims to connect India to Europe across the Arabian peninsula, and is a potential rival to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The visit also comes at a critical time with the war in Gaza enveloping the region. The visit will provide the two leaders an opportunity to confer on this very critical issue.

India has numerous strategic partnership agreements across the globe, but none displays more convergence and mutual respect at all levels than the one with the UAE. There are few major issues of divergence, which is something unique even among the best of friendly nations. While India recognises and values the UAE's role in the region, the UAE too is cognisant of the 'global leadership' role that India is set to acquire. Both countries recognise that this privileged strategic partnership is only set to grow stronger in the years ahead.

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