



Pakistani Army's symbol used for representational purposes. (Photo: Yasmeen / The Quint)

Pakistan Elections: Doesn't Matter Who Becomes PM, Army Will Reign

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The political pundits are busy pondering the outcome of Pakistan's much-watched general election to be held on 25 July, Wednesday and opining about the potential implications of this

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Indeed, there are important things to observe. First, the election has focused the polity's attention on female participation, both as candidates and as enfranchised citizens. Even though women have had the right to vote since the country came into existence in 1947, [cultural norms have often denied women the right to cast their ballot.](#)

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In some cases, women voted as their menfolk instructed them. Pakistani civil society's entrepreneurs want to change that, and hope this election will be a good start.



Second, the massive military interference in Pakistan's domestic politics has finally riled up their core constituency. As [Ali Usman Qasmi](#) recently quipped, "if you were an urban middle-class, hetero-normative male, Sunni Muslim, right-wing Punjabi, you were a supporter of the Pakistani military, and the military must have loved you back."

Third, there is the simply breathtaking spectacle of Nawaz Sharif and his daughter, Maryam Sharif, fighting the Army as tenaciously as the Army has sought to marginalise the plucky duo, in an effort to enthrone the only option the men on horseback have – Imran Khan, the Lothario cricketer turned patron of the Islamic conservative ranks.

While all of this makes for superb television ratings on Pakistan's regime-controlled infotainment networks, after the Army has its way before, during and after the poll, nothing *real*



would have happened for many things that matter either in Pakistan or abroad.

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The Army Keeps Democracy on a Leash

The Army has directly controlled Pakistan through military dictatorships (1958–69; 1969–1971; 1979–1988; 1999–2007) for 30 years of its history, and indirectly for the remaining years. As a result of the Army's shenanigans, no Prime Minister has ever completed his term.

In the past, the Army used a constitutional amendment ([Article 58-2\(b\)](#)), introduced by Pakistan's third military dictator Zia ul Haq, according to which the President could dismiss the Parliament and state assemblies.

This tool was used to prorogue the alternating governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, in the 1990s.



In 2015, President Zardari's government passed the [eighteenth amendment](#), according to which, he surrendered the powers of the President, and restored Pakistan to a parliamentary democracy led by a Prime Minister, with a ceremonial President. And with that amendment, went the power of the President to dismiss a government.

The Army quickly improvised new ways to destabilize the government through a combination of [ISI-sponsored disruptive](#)



[politics](#) (the so-called “*dharnas*” of Imran Khan, and a Canadian cleric named Tahir ul Qadri) – and by working [hand-in-glove with Pakistan’s Supreme Court](#), which has proven all too willing to collaborate with the ‘deep state’ over the course of Pakistan’s troubled history. (Pakistan’s Supreme Court for example, has given judicial cover to all of Pakistan’s dictatorships without consequence for the collaborating justices.) In August 2017, the Supreme Court ousted Nawaz Sharif, ascertaining that he was not “sadiq aur ameen” (truthful and honest), as required by [Article 62](#), which relies upon an undefined concept of “moral repute.”

The court also used [Section 99\(f\)](#) of the Representation of the People Act of 1976, which permits a person to be disqualified if he or she is not “sagacious, righteous and non-profligate, and honest and righteous.” The court came to this conclusion, even though [in 2014](#), a Supreme Court judge observed that the Constitution does not define these terms. This new legal mechanism will surely leave any Pakistani Prime Minister vulnerable to an ouster.

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Imran Khan: The Army’s Only Hope

In the past, when the Army sought to manipulate domestic politics, it always had an option that it preferred. Today, the Army’s pickings are slim. The Army’s antipathy towards the PPP is well known, and the PPP has become a little more than an ethnic party with its roots in Sindh.

Although Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML–N) has national standing, the Army



declared war on Sharif as soon as he consolidated his unexpected win in 2013.

In 1998, Sharif shocked the Army by exercising his legal right to dismiss an Army Chief. The men in khaki had long assumed that Army Chiefs dismiss Prime Ministers, and found the move to be outrageous. While the Army tolerated that decision, it decided to act when Sharif wanted to sack General Pervez Musharraf in 1999, over his singular responsibility for initiating the Kargil War, which was the first India-Pakistan war since the two became overt nuclear powers in 1998. The Army mobilised to protect its chief.

Moreover, because Sharif made the announcement while Musharraf was on an aircraft and refused to let his civilian aircraft land, the Army construed the act as an attempt to murder their chief. Sharif escaped with his life by agreeing to go into exile. However, as a result of a political deal negotiated with US and British involvement, Sharif was able to return and contest elections under the so-called National Reconciliation Ordinance of 2007.

In 2013, Nawaz Sharif won an unexpected landslide victory. The Army could not have been more displeased.



During the campaign, Sharif irked the generals by speaking out against every one of their shibboleths. He vowed to abandon strategic depth in Afghanistan and to normalise relations with India, and sought to assert civilian dominance over the praetorian Army. Worse yet, he vowed to try Musharraf for treason. The Army began undermining him from day one.

A Close Election

This leaves the Army with Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) party. Khan has been a politician for decades, but has generally been a disappointment at the polls. Over the last several months, [the Army has done everything it can to increase his prospects. This has included using its influence to persuade politicians to join the PTI along with their vote banks.](#)

The PTI has won the sobriquet of “Pakistan Turncoat Industry.”



[The Army has bullied the press into providing PTI with positive coverage, while impugning the PML-N. PML-N party workers have been rounded up and detained, and candidates have been declared ‘unable to run’.](#)

And in this election, two terrorist organisations have formed political parties, while another well-known terrorist organisation has offered its support to Khan.



Despite all of the Army’s efforts, the election will be close. The Sharifs have garnered the admiration of many Pakistanis who support his continued struggle against the Army. Whoever becomes the Prime Minister will have to do so by forging a coalition. Should Khan’s allies fail to get a majority after the votes are counted — including the stuffed ones — the Army’s intelligence operatives will fold out, with threats of legal woes and promises of money and political positions to join Khan’s coalition — as it has, countless times in the past. Should the



Army fail to install its 'cricketer prince' after all this effort, its efficacy will seriously be questioned.

Much Ado About Nothing

Despite the drama, this election will ultimately change nothing. Whoever emerges as the Prime Minister, will have the same lack of powers to do anything. The Army will call the shots in all significant issues of foreign policy, and all domestic matters that materially contribute to the Army's preferred foreign policies.

The Prime Minister can either generate public rhetoric that will foster greater public confidence in the Army's policies at home or abroad, or he can generate friction against the same. But the Army always wins. In Pakistan, the Prime Minister is a little more than a speed bump in the path of the Army.

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