



POLICY BRIEF

# An inflection point for Pakistan's democracy

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**Pakistan's democracy has long been mired with institutional shortcomings, but the election of Imran Khan as prime minister may have opened the door for greater democratic consolidation.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Pakistan's new prime minister, Imran Khan, rose to power on a classic populist platform, presenting himself and his party as the non-corrupt alternative to the country's two main parties (the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, known as the PML-N, and the Pakistan People's Party, known as the PPP), and their long, checkered history of corruption scandals and misgovernance.
- While Khan has earned an anti-West, pro-Taliban reputation that translates quite neatly as right-wing, his populism is as left-wing as right. His domestic policy platform—including the provision of social services to the population and safety nets to Pakistan's poorest, along with his focus on austerity—draws squarely from the left. Even on foreign policy, his desire to reduce Pakistan's dependence on the West and to turn eastward can be seen in the vein of a leftist brand of sovereign nationalism.
- Khan's election did not come without taint. His close ties with the military, long speculated, have become apparent in the months since the election, and the creation—via judicial and political meddling, as well as muzzling of the media—of a pre-poll environment that systematically weakened the incumbent PML-N ultimately proved helpful to him.
- Yet Khan was voted in by a diverse coalition that lends him broad legitimacy amid a changing set of demographics in Pakistan—64 percent of the country's population is now under 30, and at least 37 percent live in urban areas. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) formed provincial governments in two of Pakistan's four provinces, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and a coalition government in Baluchistan, a rarity.

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- The irregularities seen in the 2018 election—horse-trading, media threats, judicial meddling—are institutional elements of Pakistan's politics that make its democracy vulnerable to instability and manipulation. In Pakistan's environment of incumbency disadvantage, politicians have an incentive to switch parties (horse trade) to move with voters' changing political preferences.
- Historically, Pakistan's democratic environment of political instability and incumbency disadvantage has incentivized politicians and governments to engage in extractive behavior, thus setting up a negative cycle and their own eventual dissolution. Short time horizons in power also tend to encourage the kind of political behavior that dominates the Pakistani context—easily visible investments in infrastructure (the PML-N's focus) and narrow patronage to constituents.
- Khan's politics of both left and right, his appeal to Pakistan's next generation, and his alliance with the military offer a real alternative for Pakistan's democracy going forward—hinging, of course, on his success. The “job security” that the military can provide him may enable Khan to finally undertake longer-term, deep institutional reforms that Pakistan desperately needs, including widening its tax base and reforming the energy sector. Ironically, it is the stability the military provides that may enable Pakistan's democratic strengthening, through implementation of political and policy reforms. Whether Khan's government can develop the competence to deliver on such reforms, however, is still in question.
- Khan aims to reduce Pakistan's economic dependence on Washington and to seek a more “balanced” relationship with the United States. With President Trump, he has fired back when slighted, and reciprocated when reached out to.

- On matters of religion in Pakistan, Khan has shown an inclination to wrest the narrative from hardliners; he has commanded it better than previous governments.

## INTRODUCTION

On July 25, 2018, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice) party, led by Imran Khan, a charismatic former cricket star and philanthropist turned fiery anti-corruption campaigner and populist politician, won the country's general election. In doing so, it upended a decades-long pattern of power alternating between Pakistan's two major parties, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), that had in turn been punctuated by long stints of military rule. Khan founded the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in 1996, and it broke through to become the country's third-largest party just five years prior, in the 2013 election.

Khan rose to power on a classic populist platform, presenting himself and his party as the non-corrupt alternative to the PML-N and the PPP, and their long, checkered history of corruption scandals and misgovernance. Over recent years, he earned an anti-West, pro-Taliban reputation that translates quite neatly as right-wing—due to his religiosity, sometime-support for peace talks with the Pakistan Taliban, denunciation of U.S. drone strikes, and pandering to fundamentalists. It is thus tempting for many in the West to frame his rise to power as part of a wave of right-wing populists globally.

But Khan's populism is as left-wing as right. His domestic policy platform—the provision of social services, including health care and education, to the population, his vision to create jobs, to provide social safety nets to Pakistan's poorest, and his focus on austerity—draws squarely from the left. Even on foreign policy, his desire to reduce Pakistan's dependence on the West and to turn eastward can be seen in the vein of a leftist brand of sovereign-nationalism last seen in Pakistan in the 1970s with then-Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

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Matching his politics, Khan's coalition of voters draws from both the left and the right; key to his base is Pakistan's conservative, urban youth—a huge and fast growing demographic that will have to be engaged in any winning political coalition moving forward. But Khan's victory, impressive as it was, did not come without a fair share of taint. His close ties with the military, long speculated, have become apparent in the months since the election; and the creation—via judicial and political meddling, as well as muzzling of the media—of a pre-poll environment that systematically weakened the incumbent PML-N (which had fallen out with Pakistan's military) ultimately proved helpful to him.

That electoral environment, detailed below, came after a promising 10 years for Pakistan's democracy, with two successive governments that had completed their full five-year terms for the first time in Pakistan's 70-year history, and relatively free and fair elections in 2008 and then in 2013. Does this portend a democratic backslide for the country? What does it mean for Khan's legitimacy, and his ability to deliver on his policy promises? What are the implications for the future of democracy in Pakistan?

## THE 2018 ELECTION

Multiple independent observers judged Pakistan's 2018 electoral playing field as uneven. First, the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) deemed the pre-poll environment to be “unfair” in its May 2018 report. It noted the lack of “neutrality of [the] military towards competing political parties and candidates,” and lack of “freedom of private media from the influence of state institutions and vested interests.” PILDAT also judged the “neutrality of the accountability process led by NAB [National Accountability Bureau]” and the “independence and neutrality of [the] judiciary” as unfair.<sup>1</sup>

After the election, the European Union's election observation mission also noted a marred playing field, given terrorist violence in the campaign and the uneven media and legal environment preceding the election. It did note positive changes to the electoral set-up in the 2017 Elections Act, which it said had “significantly improved the legal framework particularly by increasing powers for the ECP [Election Commission of Pakistan], introducing greater transparency requirements and measures aimed at enhancing women's participation.”<sup>2</sup> This was a reference to a new election law that mandated a minimum women's voter turnout of 10 percent in order for the constituency's election to be valid.

The election also saw an unprecedented set of hardline candidates; chief among these were candidates fielded by the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), a new, fundamentalist political party whose main platform centers on the strict implementation of Pakistan's harsh blasphemy law (under which blasphemy is punishable by death). It was a failure on the part of the Election Commission that it allowed this party to contest; while the TLP won no seats in the national parliament, its candidates ran vigorous campaigns, especially in Karachi, allowing its political rhetoric to be mainstreamed. It ended up with about 2 million votes out of 50 million in the general election, and won a couple of provincial seats, including in Karachi.

### *Legal meddling*

In 2016, Pakistan's Supreme Court began hearing a case against then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on charges of corruption, after information about the Sharif family's undisclosed assets was revealed in the leaked Panama Papers that year. The case came in the wake of Sharif's showdown with the military over a leaked report in the *Dawn* newspaper of a meeting with intelligence chiefs in which his brother, the chief minister of Punjab, had asked them to end their support of militant groups. The army reacted strongly against the report, and the “*Dawn* leaks,” as the issue came to be known, significantly damaged Sharif.

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In July 2017, the Court disqualified a weakened Sharif from office on the basis of the constitutional clause that by failing to report a previous employment, he had violated the requirement that members of parliament be “*sadiq*” and “*amin*”—honest and trustworthy. Sharif was subsequently indicted and handed a 10-year sentence on charges of corruption by the Accountability Court just weeks prior to the election. Sharif’s supporters saw the decision as unfair, and as selective justice in a country with a largely corrupt political class.

While it was the judiciary that removed Sharif from office and sentenced him, his supporters also suspected the military’s influence. Some members of the military played a relatively direct role through their representation on the joint investigation team set up by the Supreme Court to look into Sharif’s assets. There is historical context to the assumptions of military influence. In Pakistan’s enduring tug of war for power between its democratically elected governments and its military—which has culminated in three military coups and numerous assertions of control known as “soft coups”—the judiciary has often functioned as a non-neutral arbiter, rubber stamping coups via the “doctrine of necessity,”<sup>3</sup> and selectively administering justice to politicians. It most notably sentenced Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto to death in 1979, under the influence of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who had ousted Bhutto in a coup in 1977. In 2012, the Supreme Court ousted the PPP Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani under contempt of court charges when he refused to comply with a judicial order to reopen dormant corruption cases against President Asif Ali Zardari.

Khan’s supporters, on the other hand, saw Sharif’s indictment as justice finally beginning to be served in Pakistan.

#### ***Political maneuvering***

Also in the run-up to the election, various PML-N politicians alleged that the military was coercing them—through intimidation, maneuvering, or blackmail—to switch ranks to Khan’s party or to

declare themselves as independent candidates. Before the election, at least 21 of PML-N’s incumbent legislators from Punjab (out of 126) switched over to the PTI, and others declared themselves independent.<sup>4</sup> But the military denied any pressure on politicians, and given the extent of “horse-trading”—switching parties—that occurs on a regular basis in Pakistan’s electoral cycles, it maintained plausible deniability.

There are structural incentives for horse-trading in the Pakistani context. Analysis of election data from the 1990s shows that Pakistan’s politics are characterized by an incumbency disadvantage at the constituency level, and this is driven by those politicians who belong to the majority party—that is, incumbent legislators belonging to the party in power are less likely to win the next time around than non-incumbents, all things equal.<sup>5</sup> This may be due to the unfulfilled expectations and perceptions of corruption associated with those in power, as was especially true during the 1990s. In turn, it is likely that this constituency-level incumbency disadvantage, along with Pakistan’s macro-level incumbency disadvantage (incumbent federal governments are voted out every time), has partly driven politicians—especially those who have some popularity independent of their party—to switch parties; they do this to move with the changing political “*hawa*” (wind) as they see it.

While the numbers on how many politicians were pressured into switching parties versus those who did so of their own free will in 2018 may not be fully clear, the incumbency disadvantage inherent in Pakistan’s political system, along with the practice of horse-trading, sets this up to be something that *can* be manipulated, furthering political instability. Such manipulation was part of the military’s *modus operandi* during the politically unstable 1990s, and in the 2002 election during Pervez Musharraf’s military regime, when much of the PML-N defected, due to Sharif’s disqualification at the time, to found the PML-Q (Quaid), or King’s Party. Post-Musharraf, many returned to the PML-N fold.

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The military has also “engineered,” or helped formulate, multi-party alliances to bolster the prospects of parties it has backed. It was said in 2002 to have set up an alliance of Islamist parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, that was reprinted in 2018. Such alliances typically improve the electoral performance of Islamist parties. It also engineered an opposition alliance to the PPP, the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), comprising the PML-N, the Jamaat-e-Islami, and others, in 1988; the IJI won the 1990 election.

#### **Media muzzling**

The media faced threats in the run-up to the 2018 election, especially those television channels and newspapers seen as pro-Sharif. A particular target was *Dawn*, Pakistan’s most prestigious English daily. Security agencies allegedly disrupted the distribution of such outlets, but this occurred behind the scenes, and the disruptions were not complete, giving the military a veneer of plausible deniability. In addition, the credibility of those media houses began being questioned openly. The tactics are analogous to U.S. President Donald Trump’s labeling of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *CNN* as “fake news.” Just a week before the July 2018 election, Imran Khan wrote on Twitter that “the blatant bias of Dawn against PTI has now come out in the open. So much for Dawn’s neutral and liberal credentials! Complete farce!”<sup>6</sup> His party supporters echoed that rhetoric. A senior military official, the director general of the Inter Services Public Relations (the public relations arm of the military and its intelligence agencies), also joined in the fray earlier in 2018 by publicly identifying various journalists as “enemies of national security.”<sup>7</sup>

#### **A complicated polling day**

On election day, turnout stood at 53 percent despite a terrorist attack at a polling station in Quetta that killed more than 30 people. The country also saw higher women’s turnout in many constituencies thanks in part to the new election law that mandated a minimum women’s voter turnout of

10 percent in order for the constituency’s election to be valid. But the hours after polls closed were marred by irregularities reported in vote counting protocols at polling stations amid a heavy military presence—leading to allegations of rigging by multiple parties—and delayed election results, which caused confusion and further speculation of rigging. The delay, it turned out, was due to a breakdown in a new result transmissions system deployed by the Election Commission, which led to weeks of withholding results and recounts after the election. Overall, the EU observation mission’s report gave the polls themselves a green(ish) light, saying they “positively assessed the vote count process in 2/3 of [their] observations.”<sup>8</sup>

Vote rigging allegations are not new in Pakistan. Imran Khan led charges of vote rigging against Sharif’s party in 2013, staging an aggressive, months-long sit-in (“*dharna*”) in Islamabad in 2014, which functioned to destabilize the Sharif government and undermine its credibility. A sizable minority of Pakistanis in 2014—37 percent of respondents polled by PILDAT—believed the 2013 election had been rigged.<sup>9</sup> As the protest faded from public consciousness, the number went down to 30 percent in 2015, meaning that allegations and protests do serve to tarnish faith in democracy.<sup>10</sup>

Rigging allegations by opposition parties continued for a few weeks following the 2018 election, and were briefly bolstered by the PTI’s unremarkable performance during by-elections, but they have largely died down in recent months. Early on, in a positive gesture, Khan promised to cooperate in any investigation of rigging.

As *The Economist* put it, “the democratic show rolls on.”<sup>11</sup> Yet the muzzling that characterized the pre-poll season has continued after the election, at least in part. *Dawn* again faced disruptions in distribution, albeit limited, as its reporting on the Election Commission and polling day irregularities was questioned. In the fall of 2018, a number of prominent broadcast journalists were laid off by

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their respective television channels. The official reason was cost-cutting in the wake of financial difficulties, but the implication is that lowered advertising revenues have left the news outlets with no other choice.<sup>12</sup> The laid off journalists tend to be ones seen as unsympathetic to the military or the current government.

Thus, while there were irregularities in the 2018 election—horse-trading, media threats, judicial meddling—many of these are institutional elements of Pakistan's politics that make its democracy vulnerable to instability and manipulation. Tackling them will require shifts in power structures, and in the country's political setup, as I discuss toward the end of this paper.

### PAKISTAN'S DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

#### ***Alternating military-civilian cycles: delivery, misgovernance, and public opinion***

Until 2008, Pakistan had been characterized by cycles of civilian and military rule that followed a pattern: civilian regimes started out with a period of high expectations that was met with a cycle of poor delivery and misgovernance. This in turn led people to switch their faith over to the military, which portrayed itself as the savior for the country, the readily available better option. But military regimes were not immune to political pressure, and the public's hopes were inevitably dashed when the military governments—by definition—engaged in repression and failed to improve outcomes for the country, leading to a switch back to democracy. Key to these alternating civilian-military cycles was the manipulation of public opinion.

After decades of repeating this pattern, 2008 seems to have been a turning point. Since then, the military—though it certainly remains Pakistan's most powerful institution—seems content to not be ostensibly in control of the government, so far as it can still control the two things that matter most to it: security and foreign policy. It seems to have realized that it is better off not controlling the economy and

it benefits from maintaining an aura of remove from the day-to-day governing of the country, so that it is not held accountable for failures on that front. Public opinion seems to have shifted decisively in favor of democracy as well, transforming a population that openly wondered about Pakistan's compatibility with democracy to having consistent majorities of Pakistanis declaring their faith in democracy year after year (in a Gallup poll conducted in Pakistan in June 2016, for example, 84 percent of respondents said they preferred democracy to dictatorship).<sup>13</sup>

But Pakistanis do seem divided on their satisfaction with their country's particular democracy: 54 percent of Gallup respondents in February 2018 indicated they were satisfied with the way democracy was working in Pakistan, while 45 percent said they were dissatisfied.<sup>14</sup>

This is because Pakistan's democratic governments to this point have been deeply linked with misgovernance, corruption, and poor delivery—in the 1990s, but also beyond. In the 11 democratic years bookended by military coups between 1988 and 1999, four elections were held with the PML-N and the PPP alternating power. Each electoral term was cut short by an escalating drumbeat of corruption and misgovernance allegations. Each time, the president (allegedly under some military pressure) dissolved the assemblies and the government through a clause of the constitution that had—no surprise—been put in place by a military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq. This clause, number 58-2B of the constitution, gave powers to the president to dissolve the elected assemblies to call for fresh elections. The exact wording—“a situation has arisen in which the Government of the Federation cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and an appeal to the electorate is necessary”—left open room for the abuse that occurred in the 1990s (the clause was repealed in 1997).

The environment of political instability and the incumbency disadvantage that I noted earlier did not set up incentives for good political behavior. In

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fact, they incentivized politicians and governments to engage in extractive behavior, thus setting up a negative cycle and their own eventual dissolution. Short time horizons in power also tend to encourage the kind of political behavior that dominates the Pakistani context—easily visible investments in infrastructure (the PML-N's focus) and narrow patronage to constituents, both of which win votes—in contrast to longer-term policy investments in education, health, and institutional reform.

The 2008 to 2018 time period brought with it greater political stability, and with five-year terms, the PML-N and PPP were both able to implement some reforms at the federal level. The PPP government enacted the 18th amendment in 2010, which devolved power to the provinces—widely lauded as a good move. The PML-N installed massive infrastructure projects and signed a deal with China for more infrastructure development under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. But by early 2018, after Sharif's disqualification, the governments of both the PPP and PML-N had been associated with corruption and misgovernance in each of their three respective terms in power since 1988; the months leading up to the 2018 election seem to have been ones of disillusionment with the options offered by Pakistan's democracy. Pakistanis questioned whether a lack of accountability for their political leaders was the cost they needed to pay for democratic stability in the country.

### KHAN'S ELECTION AS AN INFLECTION POINT IN PAKISTAN'S DEMOCRACY

In his months in power, Khan's alliance with the military has become apparent—there is a partnership and division of responsibilities at play, with the civilian government responsible for domestic matters and the economy, and the military at the helm of foreign policy and national security. Khan is the face of the government abroad, but the military is either literally by his side, or invoked by him as being on the same page. The two back each other up with (apparently) total mutual

support, at least for now. Khan is not challenging the military's power or explicitly asserting civilian supremacy, though he is vocal and communicative with the public, and clearly the face in charge of the nation. It also seems the civilian-military divide question is not one the Pakistani public cares much about anymore (at least for now)—that is, there is an acceptance of the military's outsized role in Pakistan.

Yet it is significant that Khan, as much as he was helped by the political environment leading up to the election, was voted in by a diverse coalition that lends him broad legitimacy amid a changing set of demographics in Pakistan—64 percent of the country's population is now under 30, and at least 37 percent live in urban areas.<sup>15</sup> His party won across provinces and urban areas. The PTI formed provincial governments in two of Pakistan's four provinces, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and a coalition government in Baluchistan—a rarity. It also did well in Pakistan's largest city of Karachi in Sindh, hitherto the territory of the ethnic Muttahida Qaumi Movement party. Khan secured his victory with the help of technological innovations, including a database of supporters and a phone app, to help voters locate polling stations and increase turnout.

It is Khan's politics of both left and right, his appeal to Pakistan's next generation, and his alliance with the military that offer a real alternative for Pakistan's democracy going forward—hinging, of course, on his success. The “job security” that the military can provide him may enable Khan to finally undertake longer-term, deep institutional reforms that Pakistan desperately needs, including widening its tax base and reforming the energy sector. Such moves are unpopular in the short term; other democratically elected governments have been too weak to take them. The same job security may also enable Khan to provide the social services that are fundamental to his platform, building on some successes that his party oversaw in the KPK province. He has indicated he would like to deepen Pakistan's local government

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reforms, following on the PTI's implementation of the new local government system in KPK. His policy successes, if achieved, may in turn lead to democratic stability and a new kind of political environment for Pakistan—and he could restore faith in democracy by possibly delivering one that is both accountable and stable. The irony, of course, is that this outcome would be achieved with the military's role in the run-up to the election and in guaranteeing Khan's potentially stable tenure.

There are significant risks at play. The military is known to sour on those it has backed, and were Khan to step on its toes on security or foreign policy, pushback would be all but guaranteed. That curtails the power he can exercise.

There are also real doubts that Khan has the competence to deliver on social services and jobs for the average, young Pakistani. He has no experience running a government, and neither do some of his most prominent ministers. He is a master campaigner, but has spent too much time in the past few months focusing on optics and talking to the public, still essentially in campaign mode. In doing so without a script, as is his wont, he has repeatedly made gaffes, setting himself up for criticism.

How Khan navigates his political opposition will be tricky as well. He has no friends in the two main opposition parties, given his own opportunistic rise to power at their expense, starting with his sit-in protests that proved debilitating for Sharif's government. Those parties are thus raring for blood—and quick to jump on each of his gaffes, missteps, and inconsistencies. What's more, any accountability measures taken during his term that target those opposition parties are perceived by the latter's supporters as politically motivated. Khan's supporters, on the other hand, see them as just, and as delivering on his promise of a clean government.

### ***Foreign policy***

On foreign policy, the military appears to have given Khan some space to maneuver—as long as he does not interfere with certain issues that are not up for debate, such as the question of prosecuting non-state militant groups that target India and Afghanistan, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Haqqani network. In this vein, Khan has reached out to India, largely to be rebuffed by the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which is intent on winning in India's 2019 election by relying on an increasingly strident stance toward Pakistan. Khan pushed forward and, in a win for him, inaugurated a visa-free corridor between India and Pakistan for India's Sikh minority to be able to make a pilgrimage to Sikh holy sites in Pakistan. The army stood by him for this step; both know that unless action is taken against the LeT, the relationship with India will not improve significantly, so the “costs” of Pakistan's outreach are small (“costs” to the military, which benefits from the persistence of the war).

Pakistan's relationship with the United States has seen ups and downs in recent months, largely following President Trump's outbursts. Khan has argued for a relationship with the United States based on “trust” and “mutual respect”—saying in his victory speech that the relationship should be “mutually beneficial” and “balanced,” and not one of dependence. But his quick response to Trump's intemperate tweets and statements berating Pakistan for taking U.S. aid without doing anything in return shows that he will not hesitate to respond in kind: On Twitter, Khan fired back with the losses Pakistan has suffered in the wake of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Khan will also reciprocate when reached out to—as he did during Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit (which notably was a joint civilian-military visit from the U.S. side) and in response to Trump's letter asking for Pakistan's support in the Afghan peace process—but will still aim to reduce Pakistan's economic dependence on Washington. On this front, Khan has turned to Saudi

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Arabia, China, and the United Arab Emirates looking for bailouts, with success in the Persian Gulf. In the United States, the relationship continues to be seen through a military lens, and through the prism of the Afghan conflict and its resolution—which means that Pakistan's military will largely remain in the driving seat vis-à-vis the United States, as it has in recent decades.

#### ***Domestic politics***

On issues where Khan has in the past pandered to the right in service to political opportunism—for instance drumming up the issue of Pakistan's blasphemy laws during his campaign—he seems to be trying to move the needle toward a more progressive approach now that he is in power, surprising even those most skeptical of him. But he has not been able to get very far, and has at times retreated in the face of Islamist backlash, earning him the moniker “Mr. U-turn.” When, in October 2018, Pakistan's Supreme Court acquitted a poor Christian woman on death row for blasphemy, he defended the verdict in strong, unequivocal terms. In his nationally televised speech that day, he took charge of the narrative on an issue where the state has often been fearful and silent and has let fundamentalist rhetoric prevail.

Yet, when faced with protests, his government appeased the protesters with a peace deal, but then began a crackdown against them, arresting fundamentalists—how far that goes and how long that lasts remains to be seen. Pakistan will not become progressive on religious issues on Khan's watch, but even controlling the narrative on such matters in line with Pakistan's current laws is no small feat. Pakistan's history is one in which the state ceding control to hardliners and extremists has moved the population toward fundamentalism.

#### **LOOKING AHEAD**

How is Pakistan's democracy and its direction to be characterized? Procedurally, in the past 10 years, Pakistani democracy is the strongest it has

been in its 71-year history, given that it is holding elections with governments completing their full terms in office—but this took a hit with the pre-poll meddling of 2018. Substantively, there have been some improvements, especially with the powers of the executive curtailed, and new local governments, though implementation has been slow and marginal on that front in most provinces.

Where does Pakistan go from here? Pakistan's civil-military relationship and the weakness of its political system remain key issues. Any real progress on the civilian-military balance will have to come from within, and through a strengthening of its political system. As noted above, ironically, it is the stability the military provides that may enable Pakistan's democratic strengthening, through implementation of political and policy reforms. If Khan is able to deliver on his policy promises, that will benefit Pakistan's democracy.

Pakistan's political ecosystem—especially the related issues of incumbency disadvantage and horse-trading—is easy to manipulate in a way that furthers political instability, therefore benefitting the all-powerful military. Instituting rules that would counter these features—making horse-trading difficult, for example—would be beneficial for Pakistan's democracy.

Another avenue for improvement is Pakistan's parliamentary process. Being a legislator continues to be a part-time activity in Pakistan, and voters are unclear about the responsibilities of legislators—they tend to reward them for patronage rather than voting behavior in parliament. To deal with this, it would be useful to take steps to make all parliamentary votes and proceedings public (they currently are not) and to hold regular Q&A sessions in parliament for the prime minister (something Khan has promised) and other members. It was notable that Khan had one of the lowest attendance rates in parliament as a legislator; to see if he can focus on legislative activity now will be key. Here, the United States and Western democracies can offer logistical support.

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Beyond that, what the United States can do for Pakistan's civilian-military balance is limited. It is better for America to clearly work with the civilians over the military, but it is hard to do that when the military is in charge of foreign policy and national security (i.e., where U.S. interests in Pakistan are concentrated).

The most fundamental threat to Pakistani democracy currently lies in the threats to media freedom (and freedom of speech). Media outlets that write and speak against the military have seen their ad revenues dry up and have faced intimidation (via intelligence agencies). Because a lot of this happens behind the scenes, the problem is hard to resolve. What complicates the situation is that the public (and the government) sees Pakistani media outlets as partisan (mostly warranted), and considers their reporting to be biased, in one way or the other.

On this, direct Western pressure can do little, especially given that the current U.S. administration is fighting its own battles with the press, and has shown illiberal tendencies itself. The Pakistani media needs to hold itself up to nonpartisan, international standards; Western media, including in the United States and European countries, can help demonstrate what such standards are. Pakistan's media regulatory authority can also help ensure that the media remains free of pressure, but this is hard because the state can intimidate the regulatory authority in turn.

On other illiberal moves made in Pakistan in recent months—allowing fundamentalists to contest elections—the Pakistani state is also moving away from responding to Western pressure, letting extremist groups contest elections even after being gray-listed by the Financial Action Task Force. It will have to be Pakistan's civilian government that takes a stab at reversing these trends. Khan has begun a crackdown on such fundamentalists, but how far he goes, or whether he succeeds in the long term, remains to be seen.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that Pakistan's democracy is at an inflection point. Military meddling in its elections and in the work of its civilian governments cannot be denied, and neither can the war on the media and the curbs on press freedom around the 2018 election—all illiberal, authoritarian signals—but Pakistan continues to be more than a procedural democracy. The populism that has come to Pakistan with Khan has been a reaction against political elites perceived as corrupt, as in the West. The new government now has a chance to restore faith in civilian politicians and a chance to consolidate the institutional improvements that Pakistan has made to its democracy over the years. Hopes for Khan are high, but unmet expectations have been the downfall for all of Pakistan's leaders. The new government's next steps will need to be watched as a gauge of the direction Pakistan's democracy will take next.

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