

Pakistan's 2013 elections: what implications for exclusion and fragility?

By Clare Castillejo

■ Executive summary

Pakistan's election result was a vote for the status quo and has clearly maintained power in the hands of the country's political elite. However, analysis of the election process and outcome does indicate some shifts in the deeply entrenched patterns of political, social and economic exclusion that fuel Pakistan's fragility. On the negative side these include increased splits among the provinces and a more dominant Punjab, as well as greater threats to minorities and secular voices. However, some positive trends also emerge. These include a possible increase in political appetite for economic reform and development investment; growing political confidence among Pakistan's women; and the political engagement of the urban youth and middle-class populations with an interest in changing Pakistan's corrupt political system.

As the international community begins to engage with Nawaz Sharif's new government it must recognise the importance of addressing exclusion as a major cause of Pakistan's instability. In particular, it must seek new entry points in the post-election environment to support the emergence of a more inclusive political settlement in Pakistan.

Analysis of Pakistan's 2013 election has focused primarily on the implications for the country's immediate stability and foreign relations. However, underlying the country's fragility are deeply entrenched patterns of political, social, and economic exclusion that perpetuate elite and unaccountable governance, create grievances and fuel violence. It is therefore important to assess what this election means for these structural drivers of instability.

The election result is a vote for the status quo and maintains the power of Pakistan's traditional political elites. However, it does indicate some potential shifts in the patterns of exclusion most intimately related to Pakistan's fragility.

Regional exclusion

The dominance of Punjab and the political and economic exclusion of other provinces (particularly Balochistan, Kyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal

Areas) are major drivers of conflict. The election result could increase these tensions, both by strengthening Punjab's political weight and reducing Pakistan's main parties to a provincial base.

With the once nationwide Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) only winning in Sindh, each province is now governed and represented by a different party. This may encourage a politics that promotes competing regional interests rather than common solutions to national problems. It may also exacerbate the political disconnect between the central and provincial levels, because central government will have limited influence beyond Punjab, while the other provinces will have little voice in Islamabad. In addition, the highly fragmented result in Balochistan – where voter turnout was low and the vote was split among Baloch and Pashtun nationalists, Islamists, and others – will prevent Pakistan's most excluded province from having effective political representation at either the provincial or central level.

The fact that the mandate of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) came almost entirely from Punjab may increase resentment in other provinces. Nawaz Sharif, the new prime minister, must therefore make every effort to reach out to provincial-level leaders and be seen to deliver for the whole nation. In this context the meaningful implementation of political devolution under the 18th Amendment will be crucial. In particular, devolution must be accompanied by the necessary capacity and funds (including through tax revenue) for provincial authorities to deliver on their responsibilities.

Exclusion of minorities and suppression of secular voices

This election clearly demonstrated the reduced public space for a secularist and inclusive vision of Pakistan. This has serious implications both for the plurality of voices within Pakistan's public discourse and for the country's minority communities, which face extreme discrimination and persecution. The Pakistani state's failure to uphold minorities' rights or protect them from violence fuels sectarianism and instability.

The secularist parties that formed the last government (the PPP, Awami National Party and Mutahida Qaumi Movement) were voted out largely because of poor performance. However, the fact that these parties were targeted with violence by the Taliban and effectively prevented from campaigning probably increased the scale of their defeat, as well as favoured those parties that take a "softer" approach to militants. This demonstrates the extent to which militants can now reduce space for secular voices and manipulate political outcomes through violence. Moreover, while extremist religious parties fared badly at the polls – demonstrating a rejection of their agenda by a majority of the population – the strong support for the PML-N and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) suggests a growth in religious conservatism among the electorate and brings to power actors with a more exclusionary, Islamist vision.

Pakistan's minority communities were marginalised throughout the campaign. None of the main parties addressed their interests and some mainstream leaders, such as Imran Khan, used anti-minority rhetoric. More candidates with links to Sunni militants ran in 2013 than 2008, using the democratic process to carve out greater public space for themselves. Some minorities, such as Christians, abandoned the PPP at the polls because of its failure to protect them while in office. However, others – including many Shia – are anxious at the resulting shift to the right.

Many minorities and secularists are concerned by the PML-N's strong links to conservative Islamists and violent Sunni extremists. Certainly, Sharif's personal record on religious tolerance is poor. He fostered militant groups in Punjab as a means to mobilise political support and

attempted to impose *sharia* law during his last term in office. Although Sharif has recently distanced himself from extremists, the broader party retains these links. The new government is therefore unlikely to protect minorities or curb extremists. However, while Sharif may want to take a softer approach to militants, ultimately he will be forced to confront these groups – particularly the Taliban – given the existential threat they pose to the Pakistani state.

Exclusion from resource access and development benefits

Large swathes of Pakistan's population are excluded from access to economic resources and development benefits, which are monopolised by the country's elite. For example, 45% of the country's land is owned by the 2% of the population. Likewise, almost 20% of the federal budget is spent on the military – the most powerful elite – while public services are pitifully underfunded. This exclusionary resource allocation creates grievances, fuels violence and reinforces the centrality of patronage.

Sharif has promised to revitalise Pakistan's failing economy. This raises the question of whether he is willing to promote the significant redistribution of resources and investment in development as part of his economic agenda. The PML-N has performed well on development in Punjab and may hopefully bring this developmental focus to national-level policymaking. Critically, Sharif has indicated that he would like to rein in the army. However, it remains to be seen if he dares reduce the military budget in favour of development spending.

Pakistan desperately needs two redistributive reforms – tax reform and land reform. However, these are deeply opposed by Pakistan's economic and political elite, whose interests they would threaten. In order to resolve Pakistan's structural economic problems, the new government must raise tax levels from their extremely low base (below 10% of gross domestic product). If Pakistan eventually requires an International Monetary Fund loan this could be an opportunity for international actors to push Sharif to take this unpopular step.

While economic reform was a central issue in the election, land reform hardly featured. Although Sharif – unlike most politicians – is not from the landowning elite, he is unlikely to risk losing political allies by championing this cause.

Exclusion of women

Despite high levels of gender inequality, women's political participation and influence in Pakistan have improved in recent years. This progress was reflected in the 2013 election, with a 129.8% increase in the number of women contesting general (as opposed to reserved) seats compared with 2008. However, political parties still provide very little space to women, meaning that most women had to run as independents, with little chance of success.

Of 150 women candidates that contested a general seat only 60 had a political party ticket and only six actually won. At provincial assembly level women fared even worse, with only ten of 313 women candidates elected.

Despite these challenges, women's growing political confidence can be seen in the number of women who stood as independents, the diversity of these women and their willingness to stand in conservative areas. Women also turned out to vote in large numbers. However, around 10 million women did not register to vote and some were banned from voting in conservative districts.

The women's movement in Pakistan is well established and limited progress on women's rights is likely to continue under the new government. However, some women activists are concerned that the PML-N's conservative agenda may impede that progress.

Towards an inclusive political settlement?

At the heart of many of Pakistan's problems is the exclusive political settlement that restricts power and resources to a small, unaccountable elite and fails to deliver for the majority. On the face of it the 2013 election has not moved Pakistan towards a more inclusive or accountable political arrangement. No major party offered an alternative political vision; local power holders mobilised traditional vote banks; clientism, *biradari* (kinship) networks and personal relationships shaped voting patterns; and the winner is an established part of the elite.

However, there are small indications of change. Firstly, the high turnout, despite security threats, suggests a population that wants to hold its leaders to account. Moreover, the PTI galvanised the usually apolitical urban youth and middle-class populations with a discourse about new politics and the end of patronage and corruption. However cynical this discourse or conservative the PTI's actual

agenda, the fact that it found such resonance is important. Pakistan's urban, educated middle class do want to change the political settlement, extend economic and political opportunities beyond the elite, and build a competent and rules-based state. This population was mobilised by the election and – if it remains engaged in politics – could provide significant pressure for change in the longer term.

Role for international actors

The international community is relieved that a stable interlocutor has emerged from the election. As they engage with Sharif's government, international actors should bear in mind shifting trends in relation to exclusion.

Sharif's commitment to reviving the economy and reducing the military's power could provide greater traction for international pressure for economic reforms that include fairer tax and redistribution policies. Likewise, the PML-N's development progress in Punjab may signal a stronger political commitment to development that Pakistan's donors can build on.

Given the regional split in the vote, international partners should increase their efforts to encourage and support effective devolution and positive centre-province relationships. In light of links between the PML-N and extremists, international actors must be particularly vigilant regarding minority rights and space for secular voices, and should increase support for organisations that protect minorities and combat extremism.

Finally, international partners should foster the demands for change that emerged during the election. This includes supporting initiatives to keep young people socially and politically engaged – for example, through citizenship education and youth empowerment programmes – in order to continue the debate about what kind of politics, state and society Pakistan wants in the future. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

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