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Election Watch

Political Repression and Militant Targeting Set Stage for Pakistan's 2024 Elections

1 February 2024

After nearly two years of political turmoil, Pakistan is set to hold elections for its national and provincial assemblies on 8 February. The elections will take place at a turbulent time in Pakistan's history, as it reels from multiple crises, including an economic downturn, tensions along its disputed borders, and rising militancy that has strained relations with neighboring Iran and Afghanistan.¹ The resulting instability has served to strengthen the hand of the military, the dominant force in Pakistani politics. Claims of military interference in the democratic process are rife ahead of the 2024 elections, with political disorder and militant attacks characterizing the run-up to the vote.

Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, the military has directly ruled the country for over three decades and continued to influence politics during civilian rule by selectively propping up leaders.² During the previous elections in 2018, former Prime Minister Imran Khan was believed to have been the chosen one, with many analysts attributing the victory of his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), to the military's decisive support.³ In 2024, however, the tables seem to have turned. Khan, currently imprisoned and disqualified from contesting the elections, is involved in a bitter standoff with the military, and PTI supporters are facing repression at the hands of state forces.⁴

The upcoming elections will see an embattled PTI challenge the traditionally dominant parties of Pakistani politics — the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The military favorite this time around appears to be former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, from the PML-N, who recently returned to Pakistan after four years in self-imposed exile in London following his conviction in a corruption case.⁵ In a convenient turn of events for the PML-N, Pakistan's Supreme Court in early January also overturned lifetime bans on people with criminal convictions contesting elections, paving the way for another Sharif premiership.⁶ Days later, one of the judges involved in the 2017 judgment disqualifying Sharif from holding public office prematurely resigned from the Supreme Court.⁷

These developments came after the elections, originally expected to take place in November 2023, were postponed. While the official reason was to allow for the completion of a delimitation exercise, the opposition believes the delay was intended to give the military more time to manipulate their conduct.⁸ In light of the military's perceived role in managing the pre-poll environment, few expect the February elections to be free and fair.⁹ Like with previous elections, concerns also abound over the safety of party candidates and supporters, who have been a target of violent militant groups seeking to disrupt the electoral process.

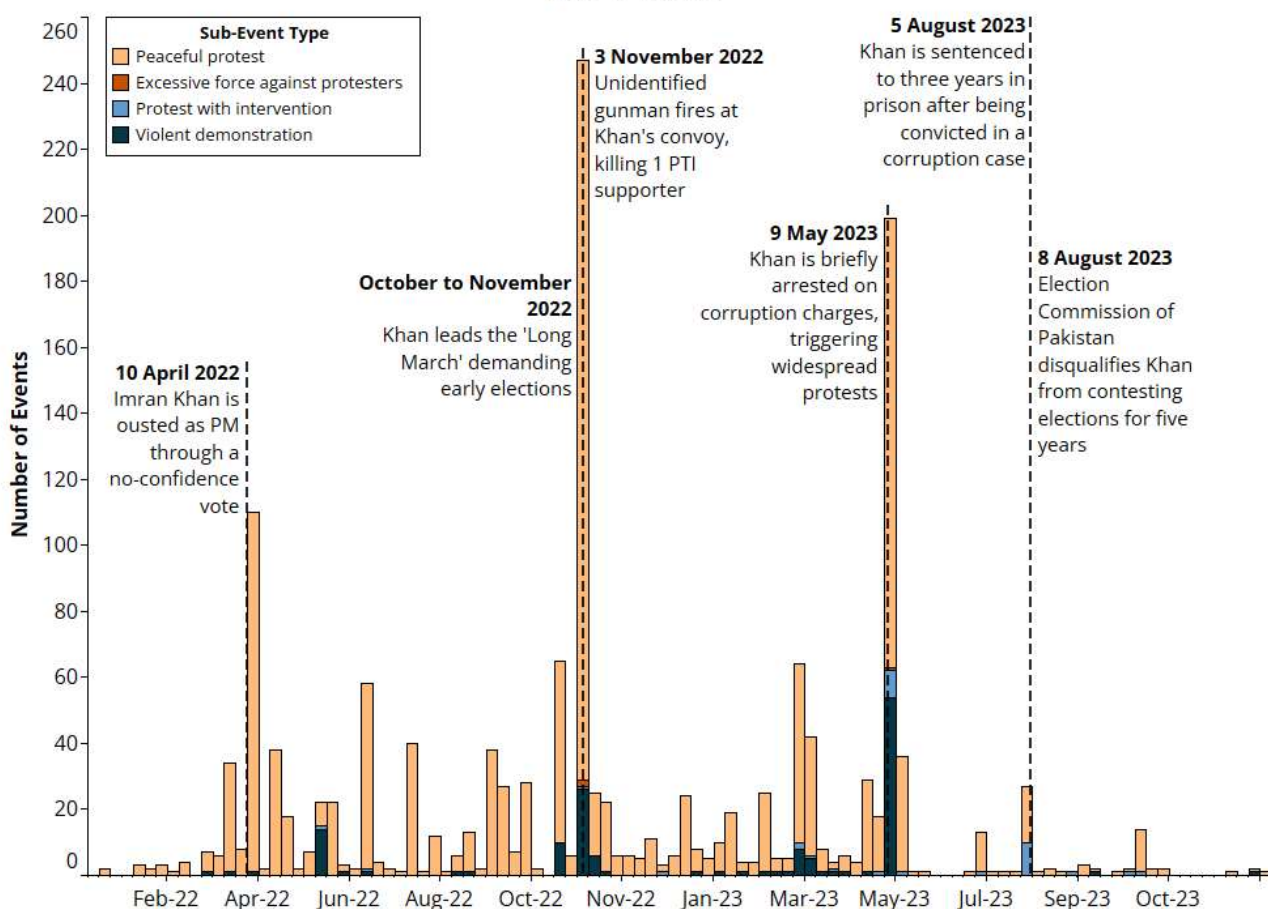
PTI supporters rise against the military

Throughout Pakistan's checkered democratic history, no elected prime minister has ever completed a full five-year term in office.¹⁰ Khan was no exception. In April 2022, less than four years after being elected prime minister, Khan resigned from office following a no-confidence motion brought about on grounds of economic mismanagement.¹¹ He accused the military of orchestrating his ouster amid an ongoing power struggle regarding the appointment of the chief of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.¹² The PTI government was replaced by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a coalition government comprising the conservative PML-N and the center-left PPP, along with other smaller parties.¹³

In his resignation speech, Khan called on his supporters to take to the streets in mass protest.¹⁴ He began a nationwide 'Long March' from Pakistan's most populous province, Punjab, to the capital, Islamabad, demanding early elections. On 3 November 2022, during a protest in Punjab's Wazirabad town, a gunman fired at Khan's convoy, wounding him and killing a PTI supporter. PTI supporters called the incident an assassination attempt, with Khan placing the blame on the ruling government and military.¹⁵

Ongoing tensions between Khan and the political establishment spilled over in May 2023, when Khan was arrested on corruption charges.¹⁶ PTI supporters mobilized across the country, organizing demonstrations in hundreds of locations. Of these, 21% of demonstrations turned violent, with demonstrators attacking government and military properties, including the residences of high-ranking military officers.¹⁷ The proportion of violent demonstrations was nearly double that seen during the PTI's Long March, when only 11% of the demonstrations involved violence (*see graph below*). Given the military's exalted position in Pakistani public life, these displays of open irreverence against the military were unprecedented.¹⁸ Khan denied his supporters' complicity in the violence and, in turn, accused the government and military of orchestrating the violence to malign the PTI.¹⁹

Demonstrations Involving the PTI 2022 - 2023



In response, Pakistani authorities launched a brutal crackdown against the opposition. Security forces violently dispersed demonstrators, using live ammunition, tear gas, and baton charges. During the demonstrations in May 2023, ACLED records at least 11 people killed in clashes with police. Such deadly use of force by police against party members is rare in Pakistan. Police also arrested thousands of PTI supporters and senior leaders, with the party claiming that many of its members were tortured and mistreated in custody.²⁰ On the other hand, dozens of senior members resigned from the party amid claims of pressure from authorities.²¹ Human rights groups expressed concern over the clampdown on political opposition through mass arrests and arbitrary detentions.²²

The actions against the PTI's rank and file have weakened the party ahead of the vote. Although legal actions against senior PTI leaders had often instigated popular reaction among the public, demonstrations by party supporters in the last quarter of 2023 were approximately half of that in the third quarter, and 90% fewer compared to the second quarter, suggesting a reduced mobilization capacity. The party's presence on the campaign trail has been muted, as it continues to face legal and administrative challenges. It has lost the right to use its electoral symbol, the cricket bat, meaning that PTI candidates will have to stand in the

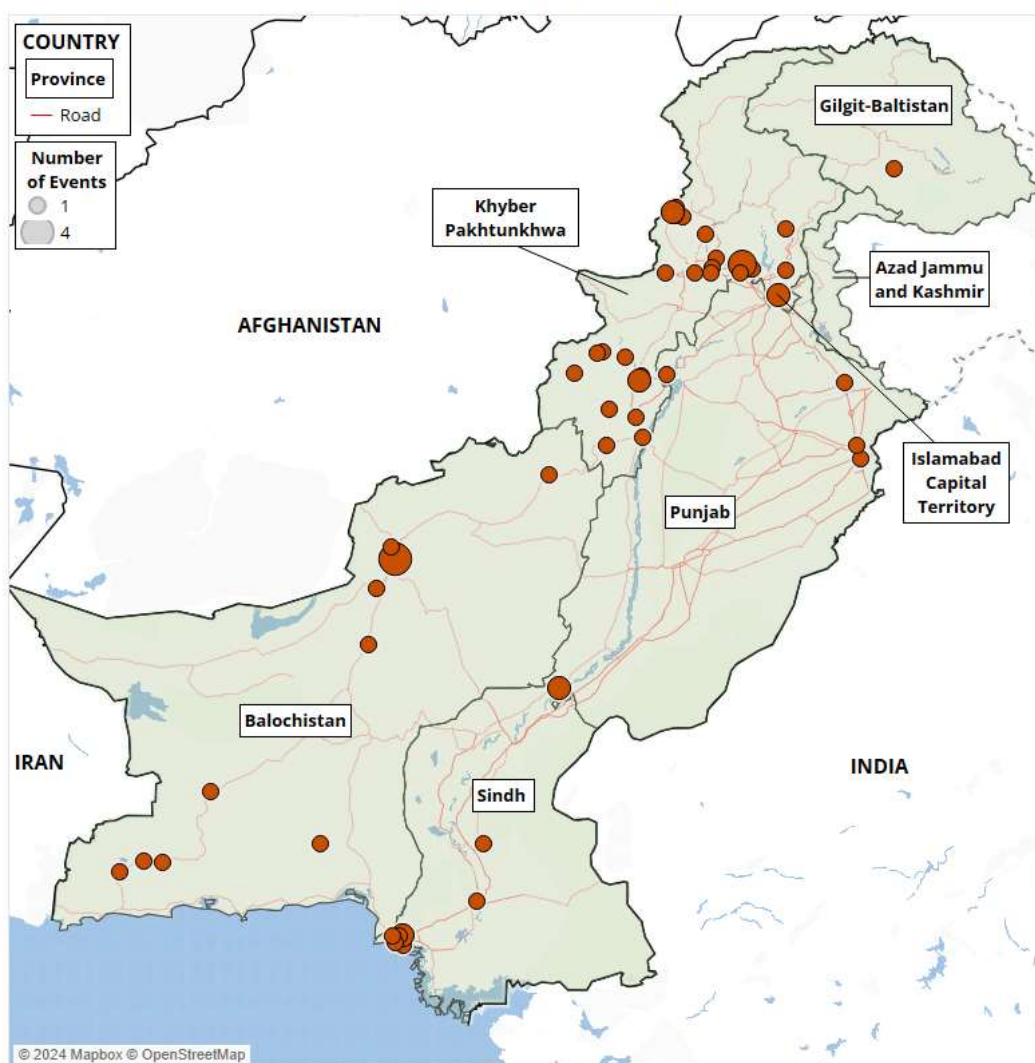
elections using individual symbols.²³ This is a major setback in a country like Pakistan, where, due to low levels of literacy, voters rely on symbols to easily identify their party of choice. Authorities have also rejected the nomination papers of several candidates, denied permission to hold conventions, sealed party offices, and disrupted internet services to coincide with the PTI's digital campaigns.²⁴ For their part, the government has denied claims of a crackdown against the PTI, claiming instead to apply electoral regulations.²⁵

Militant attacks threaten a fragile democracy

A meddling military is not the only threat facing Pakistan's democracy. In the past, the pre-election period has been marred by [militant attacks targeting political parties](#). While the actors, motivations, and targets behind the attacks have varied, most of the violence has clustered in the border provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, as has been the case in this electoral cycle (see map below).

Armed Group Attacks on Political Party Members

1 January 2023 - 26 January 2024



In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamist militant groups pose the biggest threat, as they continue their violent campaign for greater autonomy in the tribal regions and the imposition of an Islamic political system across Pakistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which ended its ceasefire agreement with the Pakistani government in November 2022, is the most active among these groups.²⁶ The TTP and its allies target political parties that they regard as being complicit with Western countries in carrying out anti-militancy operations.²⁷ The TTP has previously singled out the PPP, PML-N, and the secular Pashtun Awami National Party (ANP), while sparing the PTI, which favored peace talks with the group.²⁸ On the other hand, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) considers all political parties that participate in the secular democratic process, including religious parties, as legitimate

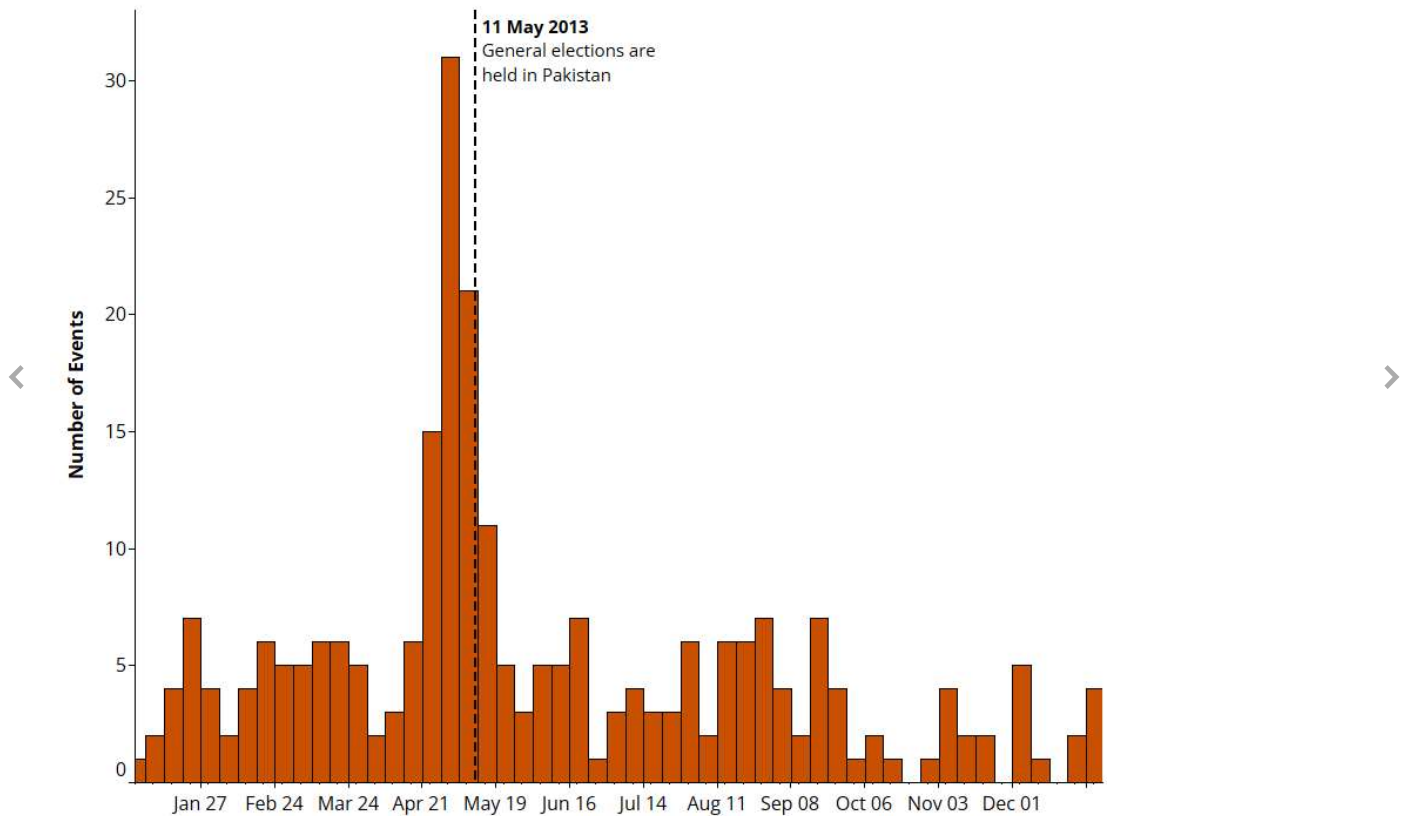
targets.²⁹ In July 2023, the ISKP targeted the Islamist Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) (JUI-F), an ally of the Taliban, in a deadly suicide bombing, partly as a spillover of its ongoing rivalry with the Taliban in Afghanistan.³⁰

The southwestern province of Balochistan grapples instead with a decades-long separatist insurgency and rising violent Islamist movements. Ethnic Baloch separatists oppose participation in the electoral process, which they believe amounts to collusion with the Pakistani political and military establishment.³¹ The Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), one of the most active Baloch armed groups, and the Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS), an alliance of major Baloch separatist groups, have called for a boycott of the upcoming elections, implying a threat to those participating in the elections.³²

In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, thus far, ACLED records no less than 24 instances in which armed groups staged attacks against members of political parties. This is comparable to the number recorded ahead of the 2018 elections, but significantly lower than the over 100 events recorded before the 2013 elections (*see graphs below*). However, while the TTP had singled out several political parties as targets in 2013, it has now pledged not to attack electoral rallies, claiming that its targets are limited to military and security forces only.³³ The announcement came on the heels of a rare meeting between the JUI-F chief and the Taliban's top leadership in Afghanistan, where they are believed to have discussed the Pakistani government's concerns over rising TTP activity.³⁴ Pakistan has often accused Afghanistan, which enjoys close ties with the TTP, of providing safe haven to the TTP.³⁵ At the same time, a change in campaigning tactics by political leaders, some of whom have eschewed the traditional large gatherings in favor of a more subdued campaign, could also explain the decline in the number of high-fatality attacks compared to 2013.³⁶

Armed Group Attacks on Political Party Members

2013



Nevertheless, political parties remain wary of the security risks. Senators from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan recently passed a nonbinding resolution seeking to delay the elections until the law and order situation improves.³⁷ Their fears are not unwarranted. Local Islamic State affiliates including ISKP, which carried out the deadliest attack targeting a political party in the last year, have warned of upcoming attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Sindh (*see map below*).³⁸ Analysts have also cautioned that similar pledges by the TTP in the past have not deterred its more independently-minded commanders or affiliate groups, like the newly formed Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), from carrying out attacks.³⁹

Looking Forward

Within the prevailing political and security situation, effective participation by political parties and citizens in the electoral process remains questionable. Campaigning activities have been restrained in the run-up to the elections while the crackdown against the PTI has continued unabated.⁴⁰ Just over a week before polling day, Khan, who has been in jail since August 2023, was sentenced to 10 and 14 years' imprisonment on separate charges of leaking state secrets and corruption, respectively.⁴¹ Frustration among PTI voters, as well as safety concerns in areas engulfed in militant activity, may depress voter turnout at the polls. At the same time, any sign of internal turmoil could see the military use national security as a pretext to strengthen its grip on power. A government elected on the back of low public engagement, and facing a powerful military, is unlikely to improve the strength of Pakistan's democracy.

Meanwhile, Khan has shown no signs of backing down — on the one hand, expressing confidence about the PTI springing a “surprise” on polling day and, on the other, claiming that any elections held in the current climate would be “a disaster and a farce.”⁴² He also continues to enjoy immense personal popularity among voters, boasting the highest approval rating among national leaders according to a Gallup poll conducted in December 2023.⁴³ This suggests that the results, expected to be unfavorable to the PTI, are likely to be contested. Whether discontent over the results and the continued targeting of Khan translates into the mass mobilization seen earlier, however, will depend on how tightly the military controls the post-electoral environment.

Visuals in this report were produced by **Ana Marco**

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