

Imran vs Shahbaz

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Just a day more to the much-anticipated general elections for the national and provincial assemblies in Pakistan.

Four Questions, pre elections

Is it finally the moment of truth for Imran Khan, which he has been waiting for the last two decades? Will the Captain be finally able to win the post of the Prime Minister for his party and himself?

Or, will it be the moment of truth for Shahbaz Sharif to finally emerge from the shadows of his elder brother – Nawaz Sharif? Will one of the most powerful Chief Ministers of Punjab, be able to work out a miracle at the national level, thereby retaining the PML-N's hold over Pakistan's polity?

What will be the fate of PPP, Zardari and Bilawal? Ten years after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the star attraction of the PPP and the last in the line of Bhuttos, will the Peoples Party be able to have a national presence? Or, will it become a regional party?

, what about the other parties – ANP, MQM, PkMAP, PML-Q, JUI-F etc, that had a national presence, at least seats in double digits in the past in the Parliament? Will they succeed in having more than ten seats in the National Assembly this time?

Questions, post elections

on 23 July will provide answers to most of the above questions, but is also likely to raise more problems when the final results are announced.

if no single party gets adequate seats to for the government in the National Assembly that has 372 seats? Will the PPP emerge as a kingmaker, despite not having enough seats at the national assembly?

Shahbaz has kept the PML-N intact to a large extent until now, will he be able to do so, if the party is unable to have a clear lead after the elections? Will there be post elections political trade monitored by a

third umpire?

there be more challenges in the provincial assemblies? While KP and Punjab are likely to witness stability led by the PTI and PML-N respectively, in Balochistan and Sindh, the electoral results are expected to throw more questions.

immediate backdrop to 23 July 2018

The road to 23 July 2018 was not an easy one, given the electoral history of Pakistan, and the political developments during the recent months. The fact that, Pakistan will be witnessing elections without a break as scheduled for a third time in a row, is a record. Despite Imran Khan's best efforts to prepone this process either on his own or along with mavericks such as Tahirul Qadri, the fact that elections are taking place as scheduled itself is an achievement.

, there was a fear that the elections may be postponed. Cases were filed in the Courts on issues relating to delimitation and electoral rolls based on the new census. There was a conspiracy theory – that a section wanted to postpone the elections to ensure that Nawaz Sharif gets convicted and goes to the jail and that the PML-N gets vertically divided. While Nawaz got sentenced and placed in prison, the second thing did not happen. There were a few defections to the PTI, new formations especially in South Punjab – however, the party stands united, thanks primarily to Shahbaz Sharif.

the PML-N, there is an added disadvantage, thanks to judicial verdicts, some even referred it as a “judicial coup”. The disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, multiple cases in the courts, media coverage of the court hearings, statements from the judges and the verdicts did affect the image of Nawaz Sharif and the party.

from the National Accountability Bureau were also misleading and done with a purpose to bring down Nawaz's credibility. For example, the statement by the NAB Chairman (based on a newspaper report that was discredited already) on Nawaz Sharif laundering money through India amounting to 4.9 billion USD was a deliberate attempt to malign him.

, Nawaz Sharif and his daughter were brave enough to return to Pakistan and get jailed, instead of staying back in London. The PML-N is unhappy; but, it has used the “martyr for democracy” slogan effectively in Punjab.

PML-N, another party that has been at a significant disadvantage is the MQM. Though Altaf Hussain should take the primary blame for getting the party discredited through his ramblings from London, the Deep State made effective use of the same. The party split into two major factions following the Altaf fiasco.

developments in Karachi hint at political engineering to weaken the MQM from becoming a dominant political force, but keep it afloat enough to create space for any political bargaining at a later stage. MQM

today is a shadow of its past, and contest the 2018 elections as a divided house, and from weakest position ever since it started taking part in elections.

who will win? Who will falter? And who will come close to the Line?

Million dollars question on the eve of elections.

Before looking at the likely winners, and who will come close to winning, it is easier to find out those who are not going to be anywhere close to the finishing line.

and foremost in the list of not going to win, is the PPP. For a party that swept the elections in 2008, after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and created history in completing its term in 2013, the PPP is not going to make an impact at the national level. It will poll votes in double digits, between 12 and 15 percentage, but not going to convert the same into seats in the National Assembly. At best, the PPP will become a regional party with Sindh as its base. If there are no clear winners, the PPP may be able to play a role of the kingmaker; Zardari has been known for the same.

– regional political parties – ANP and MQM – in KP and Sindh respectively, are likely to concede more space to the others. It is unfortunate that the ANP has become a regional party now, with its presence limited to KP and parts of Karachi in Sindh. PTI is likely to eat into this space – both in KP and Karachi. MQM should be extremely happy, if it touches the double-digit for the National Assembly, though in terms of percentage of votes, it is likely to remain in single digit.

Third, the PML-Q. Gen Musharraf who was the brain behind its formation, has deserted the party long ago. Whatever was left of the party, 2018 elections will finish it off. PML-Q should be a lesson to those leaders who believe in defecting from a leading party with the belief that the Establishment will support them forever.

, the religious parties led by the MMA. Except for the JUI-F, other religious, political parties are likely to face a rout. Besides the PTI, far right parties like the Labbaik are likely to eat into the traditional religious parties like JI and JUI-S.

The JUI-F may be the only exception; thanks to Fazlur Rehman and the organisational structure, may still be able to win some seats certainly in KP, FATA and Balochistan. Perhaps even in Karachi.

in Balochistan will retain its limited presence in Balochistan. But, will the party be able to play an active role at the national level? Unlikely.

above analysis means there are only two parties in contention at the national level – PTI and PML-N.

there is one party and one individual who has been the direct beneficiary of the Panama Papers, its political fallouts and the subsequent judicial trials and verdicts – undoubtedly it is the PTI and Imran Khan.

, the difference between the Establishment and Nawaz Sharif has also helped Imran Khan. Whether the Deep State is supporting Imran Khan directly or otherwise, he has been the primary beneficiary of the cold war between the Establishment and Nawaz.

, one should not ignore Imran Khan's perseverance. Even before Panama politics unfolded, pre and post 2013 elections, Imran Khan has been on an offensive. If the previous elections were the best until now, ever since he founded the PTI, 2018 elections will improve the tally further – both in terms of percentage of the total votes polled, and the number of seats won. From 15 per cent of the votes polled last time, PTI is expected to almost double it in 2018. That itself will be a considerable achievement for PTI and Imran Khan.

is likely to win considerably in KP and make inroads urban Sindh, especially Karachi. Though he is expecting his partners will get him some rewards in rural Sindh, PPP will retain it. But, the primary challenge for Imran Khan will be Punjab, mainly north and central Punjab.

PTI be able to make inroads into Punjab, especially its heartland? If Imran succeeds in it, he will become the next Prime Minister.

the above is not likely to be an easy task. This should bring the PML-N and Shahbaz Sharif into the focus. Will the PML-N be able to retain its hold over Punjab, and win a few seats in Balochistan and KP? Out of the total 372 seats in the National Assembly, 174 are from Punjab. So if PML-N and Shahbaz Sharif can protect their home ground and use the party's strong roots in the province, PML-N should be able to sail through. And see Shahbaz as the next Prime Minister.

Imran be able to yank his way through Shahbaz's defence in Punjab? This will decide whether Imran would become the next PM or not. Punjab holds the key. And Shahbaz's hold over the province give PML-N a slight edge.

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