Meet Pakistan’s Naya Parliament

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Imran Khan (file photo).

The opposition parties have a strong presence while religious and regional parties have a markedly lower profile

Pakistan’s newly elected members of the National Assembly have taken their oath in Parliament. Despite requiring a few more numbers in Parliament, Imran Khan is all set to become the next Prime Minister. He has promised a Naya Pakistan. How new is the Naya Parliament?

One could identify the following five factors that would make Parliament new, as Imran starts an arduous journey.

Third time in a row

For the first time in its electoral history, Pakistan’s Parliament will witness a new Prime Minister, following elections for a third time in a row. The PPP-led Parliament (2008-13), and the PML-N-led Parliament (2013-18) completed their tenure without any extra-democratic hindrances.
However, none of the Prime Ministers could complete their tenure. Nawaz Sharif was elected with substantial support in the 2013 elections but was disqualified by the Supreme Court on questionable accounts of corruption. Shahid Abbasi replaced him. Earlier, following 2008 elections, the PPP nominated Yousaf Gillani as the PM; the Supreme Court disqualified him in 2012 for contempt of court. Raja Pervez Ashraf continued as the PM until the next elections in 2013.

Both the PML-N and the PPP earlier had the majority within Parliament; however, neither party’s PM could complete the full term. Will Imran Khan be the first Prime Minister to complete his five-year term successfully?

Despite Imran Khan’s popularity, the PTI does not command a simple majority in Parliament today unlike the PML-N and the PPP earlier. The Deep State may not have directly intervened in the functioning of the last two Parliaments, but many doubt the political engineering that has gone behind, especially in Balochistan and Karachi. Perhaps, the Deep State is sympathetic towards Imran, but he will have to face a proactive judiciary and be cautious of this new threat to the PMs in Pakistan.

Strong Opposition

Second, for the first time in the last two decades, Parliament has a strong opposition within. Imran Khan and his PTI may have been riding a popular wave, but the opposition is not a lost case.

In the new Parliament, the PTI has only 158 members, including 33 reserved seats. The PML-N (82) and the PPP (54) have 136 seats together (including 29 reserved) forming opposition. If the MMA’s 15 are included, then the PTI’s opposition in Parliament will be a whopping 151.

The previous two Parliaments led by the PML-N and the PPP had weak oppositions. The PML-N had 185 seats in the previous Parliament, whereas the PPP and PTI together that formed the primary opposition during 2013-18 had only 77 seats.

Earlier, the PPP-led Parliament during 2008-13 saw Zardari knitting an alliance along with the PML and ANP that was stronger than the then opposition led primarily by the PML-Q.

In the new Parliament while the opposition is strong led by the PPP, PML-N and the MMA, the PTI would need the support of the MQM and PML-Q. With seven and five seats in Parliament, both MQM and PML-Q have already made heavy demands on the PTI.

It appears that the ruling coalition will be politically weaker than the opposition alliance in this Parliament. This was not the case in 2013 and 2008.

Lower PPP, PML presence
The third new factor in Parliament would be the party in power. For the first time in the recent democratic history, a non-PPP-PML party has been elected with significant seats to Parliament through polls. For PTI and Imran Khan, this should be a considerable achievement. It was not an easy ride for him and the PTI during the last two decades.

The above would mean, people have voted for a change. In this context, Imran Khan’s promise of “Naya Pakistan” assumes importance and he has to deliver.

An additional factor that would make this Parliament “Naya” would be the ethnic background of the Prime Minister. For the first time in the recent decades, there has been a non-Punjabi/non-Sindhi PM, elected directly by the people as the Prime Minister candidate.

The above analysis does not include those who were “selected”. Zafarullah Khan Jamali was the only exception, but even he was not a popularly “elected”. He was “selected” as a compromise candidate during Musharraf’s period and served during 2002-04. Shujaat Hussain (2004) and Shaukat Aziz (2004-2007) and followed Jamali.

Less religious, regional satraps

The fourth factor that makes Parliament new is the reduced number of the religious and regional satraps from Sindh, Balochistan and KP. The MQM, ANP, PkMAP and the religious parties within and outside the MMA banner had a significant presence in the last two Parliaments. These regional/religious satraps did not have adequate seats to form the government, but their numbers were crucial enough from an alliance perspective — ruling or otherwise.

Consider the MQM for example. In 2013 and 2008 elections it had 24 and 25 seats respectively in Parliament (including the reserved seats). In 2018 it only has seven. ANP had 3 and 13 seats in the last two Parliaments; now it has only one in 2018. The PkMAP from Balochistan had won four seats in 2013 elections, but could not manage to win a single seat in 2018.

MQM, ANP and PkMAP bring a compelling regional voice from Sindh, KP and Balochistan. In 2018, the PTI seems to have monopolised the voice in KP, and also have won significantly from Karachi. Will the success of the PTI from Karachi and Balochistan become a boon to the nation-building presence? Alternatively, will the decline of regional satraps undermine the federal voices in Parliament? This has to be seen subsequently.

The new Parliament is also significant for the decline in the seats occupied by the religious satraps. When was the last time the Parliament did not see Fazlur Rahman in the last two decades? Worse was the electoral performance of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) another religious party of Pakistan with a strong political and electoral history. This Parliament for the first time since 2002 would
also see a reduced number of religious political parties. Despite fighting together in 2018 under the MMA banner and contesting in all the seats, the religious parties could win only 12 seats directly.

Perhaps the strong performance of the PTI in KP has robbed the religious political parties of their traditional strongholds. Additional salami slicing of the religious parties’ vote bank took place by a debutant radical party — the Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP). Though the TLP did not win a single seat, it has polled more votes in Lahore and Karachi and has emerged as the third largest party in these two cities.

For Imran Khan, the reduced number of religious parties within Parliament may be a blessing but would increase his problem outside. Especially with the TLP gathering more than four million votes in 2018, Imran would face their wrath in the streets.

Enter Bilawal Bhutto

Fifth, for the first time, Parliament would see Bilawal Bhutto, a third generation PPP leader from the Bhutto family.

Bilawal has not done badly. Despite Zaradari’s negative image, he has led the PPP to win more seats than the previous elections. PPP is the only party other than the PTI to have secured more seats than 2013 elections. It has secured 54 (including the reserved seats) in 2018 when compared to 42 in 2013.

Will Bilawal be able to revive the PPP voice inside Parliament? Will he be able to revive the Bhutto tradition? Welcome to Pakistan’s Naya Parliament.

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