



Pakistan's Suppression of Elections Hurts the Credibility of U.S. Promotion of Democracy

Federal and provincial elections were recently held in Pakistan last week amid a host of clear electoral manipulation efforts. Candidates affiliated with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party of former Prime Minister Imran Khan were forced to contest the election as independents. Khan himself has been jailed on what many deem to be politically-motivated charges following his ousting from office in 2022. PTI has claimed widespread military interference in the election, and observers such as Human Rights Watch and the United Nations have substantiated these by highlighting the targeting of PTI officials through arbitrary arrests of candidates, intimidation, disruption of campaign events, and systematic rejection of nomination documents. The military has been accused of initiating a variety of meddling tactics including digital and media repression, the jailing of opposition leaders, gerrymandering, electoral fraud, and the suppression of turnout – all aimed at hindering the PTI party and attempting to rig the elections in favor of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party. PTI candidates were also prohibited from using their party's symbol on ballots, a calculated move to try and confuse voters.

Despite the military's efforts to suppress support for PTI, candidates from the party have still emerged as the largest bloc with the most seats won in the country's National Assembly. However, political uncertainty remains as no sole party or group took the majority of seats that are required to form a government outright. In recent days, PML-N and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) expressed that they had agreed to form a new coalition. Khan and PTI on the other hand appear to be ruling out any possible cooperation. Further complicating the matter is the fact that the results for various constituencies were put on hold due to complaints filed by candidates alleging fraud. The PTI party itself has focused on encouraging protests against the manipulations of election results, and announced that its candidates would try to form a government by joining a coalition with several religious parties. Some have pointed out that it appears like the military may have been caught off guard with the extremely fervent level of support for PTI candidates, which has thrown a wrench in the attempts to interfere with the election. Considering the success of PTI candidates despite the suppression tactics, commentators suspect that a prospective PML-N/PPP coalition is unlikely to find much support or legitimacy among the electorate.

The suppression of elections by the U.S.-backed government in Pakistan undermines the United States' promotion of democracy. It hurts the credibility of the U.S. as an advocate for free and fair elections, and demonstrates a case where practical foreign policy does not align with our expressed values. As such, there have been calls for the U.S. State Department to not recognize the results from Pakistan's recent elections until the warranted claims of vote tampering are investigated. The State Department was even prompted to release a statement after word of changes to official vote counts in Pakistan got out, with a spokesperson expressing the need for a thorough investigation as well and that the entity "joined credible international and local election observers in their assessment that these elections included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly...and is concerned about allegations of interference in the electoral process." Too often, while the United States seeks to promote democracy and advocate for free and fair elections abroad as a general rule, it can be selective in the actual application of this – especially if other policy priorities or a fear of potentially getting directly dragged into another country's internal affairs exist.

The interference tactics in Pakistan did not spring up now out of the blue, and instead, experts have outlined that the military has been clamping down on the PTI party for months in the lead up to the recent February elections. Over the past year in particular, thousands of PTI workers have been detained while dozens of PTI leaders have quit the party under pressure from the government. A number of PTI leaders say that they were tortured while detained, and were only eventually released when they publicly announced that they had left the PTI party. Reports have also surfaced of mainstream domestic media stations claiming that they have been instructed not to provide coverage of PTI-backed candidates' political activities. Meanwhile, the United States refrained from condemning the election misconduct in the lead up to the election. One of the reasons that has been speculated for this is an assertion that the Biden administration pushed a recent loan for Pakistan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after the Pakistani military secretly agreed to move large amounts of munitions to Ukraine. This is an example of a situation where principled U.S. foreign policy gets pushed to the side due to other considerations and perceived priorities. Unfortunately, when the United States has a primary policy objective – in this case support for Ukraine – issues relating to democracy promotion and advocacy for the expansion of freedoms can sometimes take a back seat and be sacrificed.

In the aftermath of the recent elections, analysts believe that Pakistan faces an uncertain political crisis ahead. The PTI is challenging results in many of the constituencies where they contend that the vote was suppressed illegally, and has expressed a desire to form a government given the belief that the mandate to do so was stolen. On the flip side, a coalition between non-PTI parties like the PML-N and PPP will presumably elicit popular unrest and widespread protests since the PTI won the most seats in parliament, even in spite of the military's efforts to suppress the elections. Ultimately, an unstable government and uncertainty could play into the military's hands, and allow them to continue influencing politics from behind the scenes.