

# [***Pakistan's youth deliver stinging rebuke to military elite by backing jailed leader Khan***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B9S-BMV1-JBSS-S00F-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Islamabad, Pakistan (CNN) &#8212; His political party is effectively banned, his speeches are barred from television, and he faces at least 14 years in prison. But as the [*Pakistan*](https://www.cnn.com/world/asia/pakistan)[*election results show*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/asia/pakistan-election-results-released-intl-hnk/index.html), [*Imran Khan*](https://cnn.com/2023/08/08/asia/imran-khan-pakistan-jailed-elections-intl-hnk-dst/index.html) cannot be suppressed.

[*Independent candidates*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/09/asia/pakistan-election-nawaz-sharif-intl/index.html) affiliated with the former prime minister's Pakistan Tehereek-e-Insaf (PTI) party secured the most parliamentary seats in last week's nationwide election, the election commission announced Sunday.

It is a stunning victory for an incarcerated Khan who, two years ago faced a dramatic ouster as prime minister and most recently faced a military-led crackdown analysts say was designed to thwart the cricket icon's return to power.

"You kept my trust, and your massive turnout has stunned everyone," an AI-generated video of Khan shared by the PTI that mimicked his voice, said to his millions of followers shortly after his victory. "Now show the strength of protecting your vote." Khan's team has [*previously used AI*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/19/asia/pakistan-imran-khan-ai-speech-intl-hnk/index.html) to deliver his speeches from behind bars.

The continued success of Khan aligned candidates marks a seismic moment in the country's recent history: It has delivered a stinging rebuke to the powerful military, a usually untouchable force that has long sat at the apex of power in Pakistan and - according to Khan's aides and many supporters - cracked down on his party.

"As a Pakistani, it was profoundly empowering to witness the collective outcry against injustice manifested through the ballot," said Hashim Ali Dogar, 20, from the city of Lahore.

"We have demonstrated our resilience in the face of injustice against political victimization, and we stand ready to do so again."

Forming a government in a political vacuum

Despite the PTI backed independents winning the most seats in parliament, questions loom over what the next government of Pakistan will look like.

None of the three major parties have won the necessary seats to declare a majority in parliament and, therefore, will be unable to form government on their own, leaving it unclear who will be picked as the country's next prime minister.

The results were also announced more than three days after polls closed, prompting accusations of electoral fraud from the PTI.

Shayan Bashir Nawaz, the PTI's information secretary from the province of Punjab, alleged an analysis conducted by the party suggested "significant discrepancies" in some national assembly seats and called for peaceful protest against the delayed results.

"We will take all options that we have to correct this wrong, we will pursue all legal options, and we will pursue all constitutional options," said Raoof Hassam, a senior leader of the PTI.

The military has said it remains "dedicated to upholding peace and security in the country and stand ready to provide unwavering support in safeguarding the democratic traditions of our state."

If the PTI-backed candidates succeed in forming a government, it will usher Pakistan into an unprecedented era - one in which the ruling party is seemingly at odds with the military, while its leader remains behind bars.

But the "chances for a PTI-led government currently appear slim," according to Madiha Afzal, fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "They would need to join a parliamentary party, and also seek a coalition... They will also need to ensure that their candidates don't switch over."

The rise of Imran Khan

Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation of 220 million has, since its inception in 1947, struggled with political and social instability following a traumatic partition that hastily divided British India along religious lines into two independent countries.

It's a country where militant attacks are frequent, poverty is rampant, and violence against women is widespread. Ruled for much of its 76 years by political dynasties or military establishments, analysts say decades of perceived corruption and nepotism disenfranchised swathes of its population, who were clamoring for a clean break from Pakistan's past.

Faced with a lingering economic crisis, many young voters in Pakistan, where the median age is just 22.7, viewed Khan's PTI as a change from the elite political dynasties who they perceive as being out of touch with the issues facing the country's people.

When he rose to power in 2018, it was, according to analysts, with the backing of the military. But when he fell out of favor with the generals just a few years later, and was dramatically ousted from power in a parliamentary no-confidence vote in 2022 for economic mismanagement, rather than backing down, Khan led an unprecedented revolt.

He drew tens of thousands to nationwide rallies in the streets, where he criticized the military and accused them of orchestrating his removal with the help of the United States - accusations both the military and the US deny. Millions tuned into Khan's emotive online speeches, where he spoke of wiping out corruption and bringing change to Pakistan's turbulent ***politics***.

His message, and his skillful use of social media, inspired many young Pakistanis.

"Everyone can see where the preference lies. I wanted to give my first vote to Imran Khan," said Rabiya Arooj, a 22-year-old first-time voter from the capital, Islamabad.

Yet, as Khan's popularity grew, so too did his enemies, including, his supporters claim, powerful members of the military-backed establishment.

He was slapped with dozens of charges, arrested and sentenced to prison in three different cases, sending shockwaves through the country. His party's cricket bat symbol was barred from appearing on the ballot, prompting accusations of "pre-poll rigging."

The scale of suppression had many analysts believe Khan's longtime rival, Nawaz Sharif, a former three-time prime minister and scion of the elite Sharif dynasty, would take the top job once again.

"The election result shows disenchantment of young Pakistanis with the military establishment and ***politics*** as usual," said Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistani ambassador and scholar at the Hudson Institute in Washington D.C. and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi.

First time voter Manahil Ahmed said the "youth have made their voices heard."

"Pakistan have come to the one realization it previously had always struggled with, which is that all power truly only rests in their will," he said.

"The sense of emerging victorious despite all the odds stacked against us now runs deep. Deep enough for people to come to the conviction that they will now put in twice as much commitment to protect that victory."

Uncertain future

Much of what lies ahead remains uncertain, with the clock ticking to establish a coalition government.

Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the other main candidate in the race and the scion of another political dynasty, have said their parties will work together to bring stability to Pakistan.

The unknown has many Pakistanis feeling a mix of emotions.

"On one hand, it's empowering to see the youth actively participating and making their voices heard," said Sundas Kalsoom from the city of Peshawar. "However, the delay in election results is frustrating and can lead to uncertainty and skepticism about the fairness of the process."

Haqqani, the former ambassador said it would be in Pakistan's best interest if "the people's mandate was respected."

"The worst-case scenario would be violence, crackdown, and backlash like Egypt in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring," he said, referring to the anti-government protests that spread across much of the Middle East in the early 2010s.

Despite the uncertainty, analysts say one thing is clear.

"The decisiveness with which the Pakistani public has voted for the underdog says something about the health of democracy," according to Fahd Humayun, assistant professor of Political Science & Neubauer Faculty Fellow at Tufts University.

"While public confidence in the country's institutions has clearly fluctuated in the past few years, these elections, for all their flaws, have proven that there was considerable political mobilization around the issue of representation, and that should inspire hope for Pakistan's future."

Fawad Ullah contributed reporting from Islamabad

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