

# [***Pakistan on edge as old dynasties vie for power and populist Imran Khan languishes in prison***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B8N-G2C1-JBSS-S095-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

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**Body**

Islamabad, Pakistan (CNN) &#8212; [*Pakistan*](https://www.cnn.com/world/asia/pakistan) is on edge as the South Asian nation heads to the polls Thursday for a widely anticipated general election in which its charismatic - and widely popular - former leader is [*barred from standing.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/03/asia/imran-khan-convicted-fraudulent-marriage-pakistan-intl/index.html)

[*Imran Khan*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/08/asia/imran-khan-pakistan-jailed-elections-intl-hnk-dst/index.html), 71, is a former international cricket star who rose to Pakistan's highest political office before he was ousted from power in a storm of controversy. Now the former prime minister is [*imprisoned on multiple convictions*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/asia/pakistan-imran-khan-sentenced-prison-intl-hnk/index.html) and banned from contesting the vote against his rivals - scions of the country's elite political dynasties.

The vote, delayed by a year, comes as nuclear-armed Pakistan faces mounting challenges - from [*economic uncertainty*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/02/economy/pakistan-economy-crisis/index.html) and [*frequent militant attacks*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12/asia/pakistani-army-attack-intl/index.html) to climate catastrophes that are putting millions at risk. That sets the stage for a difficult road to recovery for whoever wins in a nation where no democratically elected prime minister has ever completed a full term in office.

Two blasts in separate locations in the southwestern province of Balochistan on Wednesday, a region plagued by decades of insurgency, killed at least 30 people and injured another 40, underscoring how political violence has spiked ahead of the vote.

The clear frontrunner in campaigning is Khan's longtime foe, Nawaz Sharif. The 74-year-old former prime minister is seeking a historic fourth term as leader in what would be a remarkable political comeback following years of self-exile overseas after he was [*sentenced to prison on corruption charges.*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/21/asia/nawaz-sharif-returns-pakistan-intl-hnk/index.html)

Veteran Sharif will face a strong challenge, however, from first-time candidate for Prime Minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, 35, son of slain former leader Benazir Bhutto.

Confronted with increasing economic hardship and frequent terror attacks, analysts are questioning the credibility of the vote, accusing authorities of "pre-poll rigging" owing to a widespread crackdown on Khan - arguably the country's most popular politician - and his aides.

Both the military and Pakistan's caretaker government have denied suppressing Khan or the PTI.

However, in place of the usual campaigning fanfare that accompanies an election cycle, there is a sense of desolation among many of the country's 230 million population, nearly 40% of whom are living in poverty, according to the [*World Bank.*](https://datacatalogfiles.worldbank.org/ddh-published/0064942/DR0092451/Global_POVEQ_PAK.pdf?versionId=2023-10-16T15:54:31.9408009Z)

Many young voters - the [*median age in Pakistan is just 22.7*](https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/median-age/) - say they feel unseen and unheard, unable to pick the leader they want to guide the country for the next five years.

"Everyone can see where the preference lies. I wanted to give my first vote to Imran Khan but unfortunately, I don't think that can happen now," said Rabiya Arooj, a 22-year-old first-time voter from the capital, Islamabad.

"Our institutions are not working, the people responsible are not working for us, there is no freedom of speech. We are very distressed."

'Not much excitement'

Khan's embattled Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf party (PTI) has vowed to fight on in the polls, despite his absence from the ballot as he serves [*lengthy prison sentences*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/03/asia/imran-khan-convicted-fraudulent-marriage-pakistan-intl/index.html) for corruption, [*revealing state secrets*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/asia/pakistan-imran-khan-sentenced-prison-intl-hnk/index.html) and [*fraudulent marriage*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/03/asia/imran-khan-convicted-fraudulent-marriage-pakistan-intl/index.html). Khan's wife, Bushra Bibi, has also been jailed.

Khan, who captained Pakistan to cricket World Cup glory in 1992 and entered ***politics*** four years later, rose to power on a ticket of anti-corruption.

His party won elections in 2018, which many analysts say came with the approval of the country's powerful military, a force that has dominated ***politics*** since Pakistan's 1947 independence either through direct rule or behind the scenes.

Khan encountered multiple hurdles during his tenure as leader. From rising inflation to the Covid-19 pandemic, his government grappled with record slumps in foreign exchange, pushing the nation to the brink of economic collapse.

He was also accused of passing legislation against freedom of expression, with numerous journalists and activists critical of his establishment jailed on various charges.

Khan has also been embroiled in political controversy since he was dramatically ousted in a parliamentary no-confidence vote in April 2022, for alleged mismanagement of the economy.

That moment set the stage for a months-long showdown between Khan and the military, who he accused of orchestrating his removal, prompting tens of thousands of his supporters to throng the streets in defiance of the army. The military denies Khan's accusations.

Khan maintains widespread popularity among Pakistan's largely young voters, who view him as a break from the political dynasties or military establishments that ruled the country for much of its independent history.

"Pakistan has had polls of dubious credibility in the past. This time around they are particularly significant," said Farzana Shaikh, associate fellow at the Asia-Pacific program at The Royal Institute of International Affairs. "Not only because of the scale of repression but because the scale of the so-called 'pre-poll rigging' has rarely been matched in the past."

Pakistan's Caretaker Information Minister, Murtaza Solangi, said the upcoming poll will be conducted democratically, adding "ample resources are in place to ensure free and fair elections."

The PTI has been prohibited from using its famous cricket bat symbol on ballots, dealing a blow to millions of illiterate people who might use it to cast their vote, and television stations are banned from running Khan's speeches.

In the capital, the lackluster feeling around the election is tangible. Dozens of residents CNN spoke with blamed "the establishment" - local code for the military - for what they said was a crackdown on Khan's party.

"We want Khan because he's someone who can represent us and speak openly around the world," said student Raja Ikram, 22, adding the only issue his generation cares about is Khan's release from prison.

"We don't want a sellout prime minister," he said.

Some 370 kilometers (230 miles) south, in Khan's hometown of Lahore, many young voters responded with equal disillusionment.

First-time voter Ameer Hamza, 22, said "there is not much excitement" for the upcoming vote. "People believe the election is always fixed," the student said.

Manahil Ahmed, 23, called Pakistan's political environment "particularly hostile" right now. "We are looking for basic rights of expression, dignity to life, right to free speech," she said, adding she doesn't relate to the "elitist and dynastic" candidates standing for prime minister.

'Inches away from an implosion'

Insurgencies and militancy have plagued Pakistan but a steady drip of attacks recently has been especially grim, even if they have tended not to generate international news headlines.

For Pakistan's military and police forces, the last year was the bloodiest in a decade. On Monday, for example, 10 police officers were killed in an hours-long battle with gunmen in northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in the kind of ambush that has become a regular occurrence for security forces.

Nearly 1,000 people were killed in terrorist attacks across the country in 2023, according to the Islamabad-based independent Center for Research and Security Studies.

Pakistan has had fraught relations with its historically hostile neighbor, India, to the east and the Taliban-led Afghanistan to the west. Compounding this were [*deadly airstrikes exchanged between Pakistan and Iran*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/18/world/iran-pakistan-attacks-tensions-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html) in January, leading to concerns that a steady hand is needed to ensure Pakistan's internal problems don't spill beyond borders in a simmering neighborhood.

"The first challenge for any elected party will be how to form the government that would give it stability to form a national consensus to solve Pakistan's problems," said Shaikh, the analyst.

Violence has broken out in several districts in the run-up to the election.

Last week, an independent candidate affiliated with Khan's party was [*shot in a "targeted killing"*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/01/asia/pakistan-election-candidate-killed-intl-hnk/index.html) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, according to police. Islamic State Khorasan, or ISIS-K, claimed responsibility for the attack, which also injured three others.

Meanwhile, four people were killed and five others wounded in a blast during a PTI campaign rally in restive Balochistan province, according to Khan's party. No group has yet claimed responsibility for that attack.

Also in Balochistan, the homes and offices of several candidates from the Pakistan's People's Party and the election office of the Pakistan Muslim League-N were attacked, injuring at least 15 people, according to authorities. At least one of the attacks was claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army, a militant separatist group.

"The environment leading up to the elections is volatile, deeply polarizing and distrustful against the state and its key institutions," said Hussain Nadim, Maurice R. Greenberg World Fellow at Yale University.

Distrust of state institutions could "potentially lead to catastrophic results in the country where the Pakistan Army - in its pursuit to 'manage' the elections has pushed the political space into a tailspin," he said.

"In short, the election environment is delicate and inches away from an implosion."

'Desperate for normalization'

Three-time Prime Minister Sharif, who once saw one of his terms ended in a military coup is widely expected to win the election, given his Pakistan Muslim League-N (PMLN) party's popularity in the electorally significant Punjab province, where it is known for its mega infrastructure projects.

The former fugitive returned to Pakistan last October following nearly four years in self-exile, in a move welcomed by many in his home province. In the years running up to his return Sharif got most of his convictions overturned in the courts, with the final graft charge vacated in December, paving the way for him to stand for election once more.

Shoaib Tanveer, 39, said he was voting for the PMLN because of the facilities they have provided for Punjab's residents.

"They've sorted out sewage and gas lines, they've cleaned up our streets, fixed streetlights, there has always been a representative of theirs available to get work done and completed," the Punjab resident said.

Another voter, Baou Nadeem, 50, said the PMLN "represents progress and success."

Shaikh, the analyst, said a path had been cleared for Sharif to return to the top job.

"Perhaps rightly or wrongly the leader of the PMLN is being groomed to take over and assume the role of PM once the playing field has been cleared for him," she said.

And some believe Sharif might be what Pakistan needs during such a turbulent period.

"Sharif is a veteran. He's always been adept at balancing United States and China very well. He'll want good relations with India," said Tim Willasey-Wilsey, a former senior British diplomat and professor at King's College London.

But the likelihood of a PLMN victory could see an "an abysmally low" election turnout, analysts said.

"I don't see vast numbers and masses of Pakistanis coming out to protest the results," Shaikh said, adding that despite this, "people are desperate for normalization."

"However disgruntled the Pakistani public might be, (they are) also desperate for some stability after months of chaos," she said. "So out of resignation they will accept the results."

Analysis by Sophia Saifi and Rhea Mogul, CNN

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