

Parliamentary System and Elections of Pakistan



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Parliamentary System of Pakistan

Pakistan follows a parliamentary form of government, which is modeled on the British Westminster system. The Constitution of Pakistan, adopted in 1973, defines the country as a federal parliamentary republic. In this system, the President is the ceremonial head of state, while the Prime Minister holds the executive powers as the head of government. The Parliament of Pakistan is bicameral, consisting of two houses:

*National Assembly (Lower House)

*Senate (Upper House) The National Assembly members are directly elected by the people of Pakistan, while the Senate members are elected by the provincial assemblies. The Parliament makes laws, approves the budget, and oversees the functioning of the government. The Prime

Minister is elected by the members of the National Assembly and must maintain their confidence to remain in power.

Structure of the Parliament

The Parliament of Pakistan is bicameral, consisting of two houses: the National Assembly (lower house) and the Senate (upper house). The National Assembly has 336 members, of which 266 are directly elected from constituencies across the country. An additional 60 seats are reserved for women, and 10 seats for religious minorities, which are allocated to political parties based on proportional representation. The National Assembly is responsible for passing laws, approving the federal budget, and overseeing the executive branch. The Senate, on the other hand, consists of 100 members who are elected by the members of the four Provincial Assemblies and the National Assembly. The Senate represents the provinces equally and ensures continuity in legislation. Senators serve for a term of six years, with elections held every three years to elect half of its members. This ensures a balance of power between the federation and provinces, and continuity in governance.

Role of the President

The President of Pakistan is the ceremonial head of state and symbolizes the unity of the Republic. The President is elected by an Electoral College, which includes members of both houses of Parliament and the four Provincial Assemblies. While the President holds some constitutional powers—such as the power to grant pardons, appoint judges and ambassadors, and address the Parliament—these are largely exercised on the advice of the Prime Minister. The President may also summon or dissolve the National Assembly under specific conditions, although such actions typically require the Prime Minister's recommendation or a judicial review. The office of the President is designed to provide stability and serve as a neutral institution above political divisions.

Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is a vital constitutional body responsible for ensuring the conduct of free, fair, transparent, and impartial elections in the country. Established under Article 218 of the Constitution, the ECP comprises the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and four members, one from each province. Its primary functions include preparing and updating electoral rolls, delimitation of constituencies, organizing and conducting general, local, and Senate elections, monitoring campaign financing and code of conduct, and resolving election disputes through tribunals. The ECP also introduces electoral reforms, such as the introduction of electronic voting machines (EVMs), biometric verification, and improved procedures for overseas voting. Its independence is crucial for the credibility of Pakistan's democratic process.

Electoral System

Pakistan's electoral system is based on the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) method for electing representatives to the National and Provincial Assemblies. Under this system, the candidate who secures the highest number of votes in a constituency wins the seat, regardless of whether they achieve a majority. The system is simple and easy to understand, though it often leads to disproportional representation, especially when multiple candidates split the vote. The Senate elections, however, are conducted using proportional representation through a single transferable vote, allowing smaller parties and regions fair representation. While general elections are held every five years, by-elections may also be held when a seat becomes vacant due to resignation, disqualification, or death of a member.

General Elections

General elections in Pakistan are held every five years to elect members of the National Assembly and the four Provincial Assemblies (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan). These elections are organized and supervised by the ECP, and conducted under strict security and legal procedures to ensure transparency and peace. Multiple political parties contest the elections, presenting their manifestos and campaigning across the country. The party or coalition that gains a simple majority in the National Assembly forms the federal government, and the President invites its leader to become the Prime Minister. Similarly, parties with a majority in Provincial Assemblies form provincial governments. The process includes nomination of candidates, scrutiny of documents, campaigning, polling, counting of votes, and declaration of results. Allegations of rigging, violence, or voter intimidation are common challenges, and the ECP and judiciary often play a role in addressing these issues.

Voting Rights

In Pakistan, all citizens aged 18 years or above are eligible to vote in general elections, provided they possess a valid Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) and are registered as voters in the electoral rolls maintained by the ECP. The right to vote is universal, irrespective of gender, religion, or ethnicity. Voting is done through paper ballots at designated polling stations, where voters are expected to present their CNICs and cast votes in secret. Special arrangements are made for women, the elderly, and people with disabilities. While voting is not compulsory by law, it is considered a fundamental democratic duty. Over the years, efforts have been made to increase voter turnout and promote political awareness, including campaigns for female voter registration and youth participation.

Political Parties

Pakistan has a multi-party political system, with a number of parties participating in elections at both national and provincial levels. Some of the most prominent parties include:

- *Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N): A center-right party focusing on economic development, conservative values, and infrastructure projects.
- *Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP): A center-left, progressive party with roots in socialism and strong support in Sindh province.
- *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI): A centrist to center-right party founded by Imran Khan, advocating for anti-corruption, justice, and governance reforms.
- *Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM): A regional party with strong urban support in Sindh, especially Karachi and Hyderabad.
- *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and other religious parties also play a role, particularly in conservative areas. These parties differ in ideology, regional strength, leadership, and support base. The electoral system encourages the formation of coalitions, particularly in the Senate and Provincial Assemblies, making alliances an essential part of Pakistan's democratic politics.