

The Pakistan test

Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf has exceeded expectations in emerging from Wednesday's election within touching distance of a majority. The **former cricketer** will come to the Prime Minister's office at the end of a bitter year, and his first test will be to assert a legitimate claim to power. The campaign for these federal and provincial elections in Pakistan has been called the "dirtiest" in its history, and the announcement of the results is already tainted by allegations of rigging and military interference. In fact, the removal of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister last summer and later from the electoral arena over a conviction on corruption charges had given the impression that the dice were loaded in Mr. Khan's favour. The former cricketer will be watched for how he emerges from the shadow of the campaign and the election itself. **His immediate task** is to negotiate assistance from the International Monetary Fund to stave off a balance of payments crisis. Pakistan has already sought more loans from China, with no sign that the costs of infrastructure projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will be recovered soon. His next set of challenges emerge from the region, where he will be expected to make good on promises made by Pakistan to Washington and Kabul to crack down on terror and bring the Taliban to the table for talks. Mr. Khan has long held that the U.S. must first pull out troops from Afghanistan, and was called "Taliban Khan" for suggesting that Taliban militants were fighting for "independence". The next steps will take place amid great scrutiny of the tenor of his engagement with Donald Trump's administration, given the U.S. President's tough talk against Pakistan.

Mr. Khan will also have to tackle terror groups inside Pakistan, those that target Pakistani forces and those trained with Pakistan's support to target its neighbours. It is here that Prime Minister Khan will be most tested; these groups function with impunity, and it remains to be seen whether his softness during the campaign against them will carry over into the **prime ministership**. Significantly, he spent the most time on ties with India when listing his foreign policy priorities. While his comments on alleged human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir will not be viewed kindly in New Delhi, those on resolving disputes through dialogue must be regarded seriously. So far, he had distanced himself from what he called the "soft approach" of the Sharif government towards India. But after the election result, Mr. Khan claimed that no Pakistani leader had engaged more with India than he had. He offered to take two steps forward if India reciprocates. For the moment, he will also be aware of other odds that are stacked against him; not the least being that of becoming the first Pakistani PM to complete a full term.

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