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Previewing Pakistan's 2013 Elections

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Introduction and summary

Over the past decade, U.S. engagement with Pakistan has experienced periods of close cooperation, mutual mistrust, and near-breakdown. Contemporary American policy attention on Pakistan since 2001 has primarily focused on the threat of terrorism and how to respond to domestic militant actors that threaten the security of the United States, Pakistan's neighbors, and the Pakistani people. Even as the United States realigns its military investments in neighboring Afghanistan over the coming years, Pakistan will remain an important concern for U.S. statecraft, and for reasons broader than just the counterterrorism context. Pakistan is a nuclear-armed state with a growing population of approximately 190 million people—as many as two-thirds of whom are under age 30—and is strategically located between the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, neighboring China, India, and Iran. Pakistan's responses to its many internal political, economic, and security challenges over the coming years will have a major impact on the South Asian region and beyond.

Understanding the country's potential future course on almost any issue requires an understanding of Pakistan's internal political processes and how those processes might be changing. Over the past five to six years, Pakistan's political system has experienced a heavily contested and ongoing decentralization of power. The durability of these shifts is still highly uncertain, as Pakistan's historical cycle of military coups may attest. But understanding the competing interests of, and building partnerships with, a broad range of Pakistani political actors will be a requirement for effective U.S. engagement with Pakistan in the coming years.

Since the 2007–2008 period, the powerful central authority constructed by former military chief Pervez Musharraf during his nine-year rule as chief executive and then president of the country has since given way to a parliamentary coalition, led by the Pakistan People's Party, or PPP, and President Asif Ali Zardari. The Pakistan People's Party's efforts to maintain this broad coalition against a host of rivals have served to increase the bargaining power of the parliamentary opposition, regional parties, and local political actors. Processes of administrative devolution started in 2010, though

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still partial and incomplete, have further increased subnational autonomy and expanded the provincial share of national revenues. The government has also been forced to accommodate the demands of new political movements that lack institutional representation within the formal system, but have nonetheless been able to mobilize public and media platforms for their causes.

Contests over the rules of the political system are not limited to the country's elected representatives or political leaders. Pakistan's judiciary, led by the activist Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, has moved to establish its authority over and independence from the other branches of the Pakistani system. The courts serve as both a field for competition and player in their own right, as is also the case with the broadening Pakistani media landscape. Pakistan's powerful army, by virtue of its institutional cohesion and control over many of the country's economic and military assets, remains the country's single-most powerful actor. But even the army, under the leadership of Chief of Army Staff Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, has been obliged to balance its relations with civilian, judicial, and foreign leaders, and it has been courted and challenged in turn.

Against this backdrop, Pakistan's current PPP-led coalition government has announced the completion of the current parliament's term, the establishment of a caretaker government, and the holding of national general elections to take place on May 11, 2013.¹ These elections and the coalition-forming negotiations to follow will also closely coincide with the scheduled expiration this year of the terms in office for Gen. Kayani, whose tenure was extended for an extra three years by President Zardari in July 2010; President Zardari, whose five-year term concludes in September but who could be potentially reelected by a new parliament; and Chief Justice Chaudhry, whose term lasts until December.

The prospect of an elected civilian government transferring power through the electoral process at the end of a full term in office to another civilian successor is an unprecedented event in Pakistani history. Precisely forecasting the outcome of the upcoming election is outside the scope of this paper's ambitions, as any such predictive attempts are complicated by a number of factors. These include the country's well-established history of overt or covert military intervention in past elections; an absence of robust public opinion polling data; varying standards for voter registration between elections; and the considerable risk of exogenous incidents—such as the 2007 assassination of former PPP leader Benazir Bhutto, or former Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's disqualification from office in 2012 on contempt of court charges—that can disrupt “normal” political processes.²

With these caveats in mind, in an effort to better inform analysis of the forthcoming general election campaign and results, this report overviews the major political dynamics that have characterized the current Pakistani government's tenure, and previews the elections by assessing the principal political competitors, their bases of support, and the likely points of dispute before and after elections are held. Even as the Pakistani political system becomes more complex, the United States retains continued interest in engagement across a broad range of security, economic, and diplomatic concerns. Moves to set the conditions of competition and the boundaries of authority will form the primary driver of Pakistani politics for the foreseeable future, and understanding those processes will be critical for shaping effective U.S. policy toward Pakistan.

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