

## Summary

As citizens gear up to cast their votes on February 8<sup>th</sup> for the Pakistani general elections, the proposition to delay the date due to poor weather conditions and security concerns has been raised. Sources highlight these upcoming elections as potentially the most manipulated in Pakistan's intricate democratic history. The year 2023 marked a grim milestone, with the country experiencing its deadliest year in a decade for both police and military forces. Over 500 personnel were lost in terrorist bombings and ambushes.

## Recent events and developments

The spectre of pre-election rigging from the 2018 elections looms over the 2024 elections, unsettlingly. Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister and PTI party leader, faces an electoral setback, barred from participating due to multiple charges against him laid out by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and multiple attempted arrests in 2023. Although the Pakistani military is preventing Khan from running in the elections, he remains a favourite of the public. On January 5, the Senate passed a resolution to further delay the elections, initially set for November. The rationale is rooted in escalating security threats in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, where 93% of the 600+ terrorist attacks in 2023 occurred— a 60% increase from 2022. December 23, 2023, highlighted the perilous security situation. Taliban-affiliated Tehreek-i-Jihad terrorist group attack claimed 23 soldiers' lives wounding over 30 by ramming an explosive-laden vehicle into a security post in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, marking the deadliest attack of the year. Although civilians are not the main target of groups such as the Pakistani Taliban and ISIS Khorasan, they are often seen as collateral damage and have led to upwards of 15,000 deaths.

## Impact assessment

With Imran Khan no longer the leader of the PTI party, social discontent, public frustrations and, lack of trust in the military due to their increasing involvement in the election process may lead to large protests as seen in November due to the initial election postponement. The public views Khan's ban from the elections and arrest as a political plot to swing results in favour of the opposition. A predetermined election result is likely to cause discontent and potential for protests. The sense in Pakistan is that the election will very likely be held once the government has finished side-lining Khan and can be ensured that an election will yield its desired outcome of an opposition victory.

Security forces are by far the most popular targets in both separatist and terrorist attacks, and within the current socio-political context, they further destabilise Pakistan's ability to go forth with a democratic election by hindering citizens' right to a free and fair election. Travellers may become collateral targets if caught up in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces that border Afghanistan, where security forces and civilians clash, due to the unpredictability and recent increase in attacks in the past year.

## Advice from Forth Global

- Make sure emergency and evacuation plans are updated and appropriately distributed to employees on the ground.
- Staff traveling to Pakistan should undertake a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment.
- Advise staff to avoid protests and demonstrations of any kind, as violence is likely to erupt.
- Monitor local news to stay informed about any developments regarding the political situation and planned protests. Be aware that internet access may not be guaranteed.
- Advise staff to avoid all non-essential travel to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. If travel is necessary, advise staff to plan their journey and check the state of the roads.

## Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

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