

## General elections in Pakistan. Ahmad (journalist): "We don't expect to see a big change, it will be a sham, crippled democracy"

Pakistan's general elections are taking place in a "gridlocked country" that is "struggling not to perish" and whose "bogus, crippled democracy" has been under the control of the army for decades, with the tacit approval of the United States. Pakistan is the only country of 54 Islamic countries to possess nuclear weapons and the only one with a professional military. For its 240 million people, 90 per cent of whom live in poverty, there is little change in sight: endemic corruption, skyrocketing inflation and the constant spectre of bankruptcy. The same goes for religious minorities, including Christians, who make up around 1.6% to 2% of the total population. "Everything will remain as before. I expect a five-year stalemate. The billionaires will be in power, so they will keep the economy going somehow," says Pakistani journalist **Ejaz Ahmad**. As for minority groups, "no political party would have the courage to abolish the Blasphemy Law, since all of them are inspired by the Islamic faith. That is why we have to make sure that the abuses diminish." The main political parties in the race are the Pakistan Muslim League, led by 74-year-old Nawas Sharif, who ruled until 2017 and returned from exile in London in October to avoid corruption trials that were eventually shelved, and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and his father Asif Ali.



he says. "The country is facing an economic slowdown and the PPP and Muslim League parties - which have been ruling like chronic diseases for decades - are bound to win. They will meet the army's demands and it will look like a democracy in the world's eyes. But it's a shady democracy." There are fears of fraud and more deaths in the run-up to the results, which are due in a week or ten days.

"The ruling party in Pakistan is the establishment, the military and the army generals. Through their secret service, they control the press, the judiciary and the police.

Whatever the army decides - implicitly or explicitly - is acted upon. Judges are often forced to resign because they do not toe the line," the journalist pointed out. **Pakistan's most recent leader was Imran Khan**, a former, popular cricket player who, along with his wife, was sentenced to prison for corruption. He was a symbol of change, having been elected by many young people and women. The military, which initially supported him, eventually turned its back on him. There are more than 150 cases pending against him, and not even his party, the PTI (Movement for Justice), can stand in the elections, nor can its symbol, the cricket bat, be used. "Symbols are very important in a country where 60 per cent of the rural population is illiterate," he explained. Khan has managed to get his free candidates to stand for election from prison, using a variety of symbols. But if elected, they could join the two main parties. **Imran Khan was a populist, popular leader**, but "he started to go his own way", he points out. "A few days before the invasion of Ukraine, he was in Moscow visiting Putin, and took a stand against the United States. For the first time ever, military barracks were set on fire by some of his supporters. After these events, he was stripped of all his rights. He is no longer considered a hero of Pakistan for his sporting fame and social activities. Even his marriage has been

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called into question: he is accused of 'not respecting the dictates of Islam'. In our countries, those who triumph are the heroes, the individuals, not the parties or the political party platforms," he explains. "Democracy arrived here with the Europeans, but we did not have the Enlightenment or the French Revolution. There is no individual cultural identity here: one person, one vote. What exists is the group, the family. In my town, for example, they always ask the castes for their vote. **There seems to be a habit of sending leaders to jail**, as happened to Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Nawas Sharif after they were ousted by the army. The parties are "right-winged, they advocate an Islamic democracy where religion is paramount. They are all similar, but they have no platform to change the country. However, they know how to control the army." Ahmad remarked: "**The US finances the army and decides who should rule**. They've always been able to influence Pakistani politics. It is in their interest to maintain the status quo as long as their political agenda is met." **At least 22 people were killed and 37 wounded in the run-up to the vote**, mainly in Balochistan, Pakistan's largest region with the largest mineral, gas and oil reserves, which has been rocked by autonomy movements demanding control of resources now controlled by the army and by China, now building major infrastructure in the area. According to Ahmad, "more deaths are probable during and after the elections, with riots in many cities. The Muslim League is likely to win and Sharif will take power. If Nawas is not elected, they will elect his daughter or his brother Shebaz. They will play into the hands of the army and the United States," although "there is no longer a flood of foreign money coming in as there was during the war in Afghanistan." Therefore

it is a country "that must struggle not to perish.

There were widespread fears that the country would go bankrupt, as happened in Sri Lanka. Instead, it is surviving through the army and internal scheming. They will set up a sham government that will look democratic in the eyes of the world, but not much will change for the impoverished people. I hope there will be no bankruptcy, but in terms of freedoms and rights there is little hope. Social media plays a big role, but it's not enough because there are no movements in Pakistan yet. There is no middle class that could bring about a revolution." **Not much will change for Christians and other religious minorities either**. "During his time in power, Nawaz Sharif passed an important piece of legislation to stem the abuse of the blasphemy law, namely the mandatory summoning of witnesses when a person is accused of insulting Islam and the Prophet. Previously, a single complaint was enough. This has greatly reduced the number of victims.

But no political party will ever have the courage to abolish the blasphemy law, because they are all Islamic. So we have to make sure that the cases of abuse will decrease."

Unfortunately, without the interest or pressure of international public opinion, the persecutions will continue," concluded Ahmad, "because this is a country where even the leaders are persecuted.

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