

Picturing Politics: the 2013 Pakistan elections
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Pakistan's voters have just gone to the polls. Significantly, this is the first time that a freely elected government has completed its term and handed over power to another elected government. Just as significantly, there has been a turnover in power.

The manifesto of the Pakistan Peoples Party, prominently features Benazir Bhutto. The smaller portraits are intended to remind voters (as if they needed reminding) that Benazir was the daughter of hanged prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and was the mother of (the PPP hopes) a future prime minister, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

As many are no doubt aware, Benazir was assassinated during the 2008 election. Riding the wave of sympathy, the PPP managed to cobble together a governing coalition. This time round the PPP narrowly avoided being beaten into third place (by Imran Khan's PTI). Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is about to start his third premiership

The use of the Bhutto family images on the cover of the PPP manifesto tells us much about the dynastic element to Pakistani politics. Personalities and symbols matter, as it is not clear how many voters are aware of manifesto promises, and still fewer would decide their votes on the basis of one. Political parties in Pakistan are often little more than a collection of locally powerful personalities with little programmatic affiliation. As such the image of the leader provides a rallying point.

So why did the image of Benazir, which still has resonance with many; fail to deliver more seats for the PPP? A partial answer is that dynastic politics was diluted by the inability of Benazir's son to campaign because of the (very real) dangers of assassination. The PPP was one of three parties targeted directly by the Pakistan Taliban. In contrast, Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan were able to campaign more or less freely, calling into question whether the elections can truly be said to be free and fair.

But it is not the whole story. There was widespread disillusionment with the PPP led government. Its failure to deliver ensured that many voters voted with their feet. Imran Khan's calls for Naya (new) Pakistan touched the hearts of many (even before his dramatic accident). An indication of this is that turnout reached 60% (even though many of these voters voted for Sharif rather than Khan).

No one in 2008 could have confidently predicted that the parliament would be allowed to complete its term. Pakistan is changing. Tens of millions now have access to alternative sources of information and urbanisation is increasing. Although Pakistan's democracy is far from perfect, there are good reasons to be positive.