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Pakistan's Election: Three Way Race Could Come Down to the Wire

By Jason Ditz

May 10, 2013

It is Saturday morning in Pakistan, and voters are heading to the polls for an historic election, while analysts are left wondering where it will all end up, since myriad polls have predicted several possible outcomes.

Security is a big factor in the election, and voter turnout is expected to play a significant role in who wins and who loses. Pakistan's Army has taken control of "highly sensitive" polling sites across Karachi, a city which has seen a lot of political violence.

In the end though, it is really a three-man race, with the other parties only likely to play a role as a minority partner in a government led by one of them. The ruling Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) is still seen having an outside shot, despite the huge unpopularity of President Zardari and its lack of any real leader during the campaign.

Pakistani Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI) leader Imran Khan is looking to transform his usually minor party into a huge force, though a freak accident in which he broke three vertebrae during a campaign stop has kept him off the trail the past few days. The sympathy vote could help him, though it is believed he will need a big turnout to win.

Which leaves many to believe the "smart money" in this election is on Nawaz Sharif, the head of the Pakistani Muslim League-N (PML-N) and a former prime minister, who saw his last term in office ended with a coup d'etat by Gen. Pervez Musharraf.

Both Sharif and Khan have made it clear they will dramatically rethink national policy toward the US if they are elected, and while the PPP hasn't been as blunt, it seems certain that if they do stumble into reelection they are going to see the liability of perceived pro-US leanings as costing them a bigger majority.