

The Process Of Democratization And Role Of Opposition Parties In Pakistan (2013-2022): A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of opposition parties in shaping the democratization process in Pakistan between 2013 and 2022. Relying primarily on interviews and other qualitative data investigates into how opposition parties responded to key political events and challenges that defined this period. One of the central issues examined is the controversial general elections of 2013 and 2018, both of which were accompanied by widespread allegations of rigging and manipulation. These elections not only sparked intense reactions from opposition parties but also triggered significant political instability across the country. The research paper also explores the aftermath of these elections, particularly focusing on how political instability deepened after 2013. This instability created an instable environment where opposition parties played a crucial role in questioning the legitimacy of the ruling governments and calling for reforms in the electoral process. Paper addresses the intervention of apolitical actors, which further complicated the democratic process. Such interventions often led to compromised parliamentary supremacy, with non-political actors influencing key decisions and undermining democratic institutions.

Another important theme is the increasing use of un-parliamentary and inflammatory rhetoric during this period. The political discourse between opposition parties and the government became increasingly hostile, contributing to a growing divide within the politics. It also examines issues related to accountability and political victimization, where opposition parties frequently accused the ruling government of targeting political opponents under the guise of accountability measures. Finally, the dissension between the government and opposition parties is discussed in detail, highlighting how this conflict hindered constructive dialogue and progress towards a more stable democratic system. This analysis aims to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Pakistan's democratic institutions during these critical years.

Keywords: widespread ,allegations ,interventions ,electoral

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Elections and Elections Results

The Constitution of Pakistan mandates democracy as the country's political system, emphasizing free and fair elections. However, almost every election has been marred by allegations of rigging, regardless of whether it was supervised by civilian governments or the military establishment. Historically, Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies system, Bhutto's Bonapartist-styled elections, and General Zia's referendum were all criticized as manipulated or staged. Both the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have accused each other of electoral interference. Later, President Musharraf sought to weaken these two major parties, supporting the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) (PML-Q) with significant seats (Talbot, Ian, 2015).

The 2008 election, following Benazir Bhutto's assassination, was also considered controversial. In the 2013 election, opposition parties alleged unprecedented rigging. Though irregularities were noted, they were not seen as systemic or nationwide. Issues were more prevalent in Karachi, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and the former tribal areas where voters from the Awami National Party (ANP) and PPP were reportedly intimidated by threats from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), affecting voter turnout (Waseem M. , Political Conflict in Pakistan, 2021). The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) and international observers, however, declared these elections largely fair.

But the 2018 election faced widespread allegations of interference, harassment of candidates, and media manipulation favoring Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Some parties, including PML-N, PPP, and ANP, claimed they were denied a level playing field due to interventions by the judiciary and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). Media narratives focused on corruption allegations against PML-N, creating a pro-PTI atmosphere. Reports indicated that nearly 81% of respondents in Punjab supported PML-N, but narratives of "change" were heavily promoted for PTI (Mir, Hamid, 2023). Concerns were raised about the reliability of the Result Transmission System, which malfunctioned on Election Day, delaying results by up to 48 hours (Waseem M. , Political Conflict in Pakistan, 2021).

Before the 2018 election, parties such as PML-N, PPP, MQM, JUI, and ANP questioned the transparency and impartiality of the election process. For example, Asfandyar Wali Khan of ANP reported that PTI received open support in KP, and PPP argued that the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) in Sindh was similarly favored. In Balochistan, Pashtun and Baloch nationalists protested against the rise of the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), a new faction formed from PML-N defectors (Safi, Saleem, 2021). The imbalance in the electoral process led to a lack of political stability post-election.

According to observers, including PILDAT, the 2018 election was marked by biased media coverage and accountability practices favoring PTI. The report highlighted a lack of military neutrality and interference from state institutions, which undermined

democratic transparency (PILDAT, Report of Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development And Transparency, 2018). According to an academician “the persistent issue of election manipulation has promoted political instability, impeding Pakistan's democratization process. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is responsible for ensuring free and fair elections under Article 218(3) of the Constitution. While irregularities have been frequent, political maturity and electoral reforms could strengthen democratic practices. Refusal to accept election results has become a trend in Pakistan, disrupting the democratization process. Political parties should work together to empower the ECP through consensual reforms” (Marwat, 2024).

Similarly, Senate elections from 2013 to 2022 have faced accusations of corruption, vote-buying, and manipulation. In the 2015 Senate election, PML-N, PPP, and other parties accused each other of horse trading. Wealthy business figures and feudal lords, often securing Senate seats through financial influence, were symbols of this issue. Calls for voting transparency, such as open ballots, remain unaddressed (Masood, Salman, 2024). In 2021, despite calls from PTI for an open ballot system, Senate elections continued in the traditional format (Safi S. , Aur Tabdeeli Layee Gayee, 2021).

The influence of Pakistan’s establishment in politics, especially in Senate chairmanship elections, has also been widely acknowledged. The 2018 election saw Sadiq Sanjrani, reportedly backed by the establishment, won against PML-N’s experienced candidate Raja Zafar-ul-Haq. Allegations of vote-buying persisted, with some suggesting that a direct election system for the Senate could mitigate these issues (Gormani, 2021).

In sum, Pakistan’s electoral processes remain highly contested with frequent claims of interference from political, military, and economic interests. Strengthening the ECP, ensuring impartial media, and adopting transparent electoral reforms are critical to stabilizing Pakistan’s democracy.

Opposition Parties’ Reactions to the 2013 and 2018 General Elections

In the aftermath of the 2013 general elections, the PTI, led by Imran Khan, voiced significant concerns regarding electoral rigging. While PTI accepted the election results reluctantly, it called for investigations into rigging allegations, initially focusing on four constituencies as a preliminary test for assessing the broader electoral process. Facing delays from the government, PTI escalated its demands through public gatherings across Punjab, a key political stronghold for Nawaz Sharif’s PML-N (Dawood Mammon, etal, 2017). By August 2014, Imran Khan emphasized PTI’s attempts to seek justice through legal channels, having presented a 2100-pages report that claimed to document electoral fraud. Despite this, no substantial action was taken, prompting Khan to argue that, in a functioning democracy, such allegations would have led the courts to annul the results and call for fresh elections. PTI petitioned the Supreme Court, which required conclusive evidence to nullify any results. When this petition failed due to insufficient evidence under Pakistan’s legal

standards, PTI intensified its public outreach, rallying supporters nationwide (Rehman, 2015). Khan's campaign evolved to include accusations against Punjab's caretaker government and media mogul Mir Shakeel-ur-Rehman for alleged involvement in the election manipulation. Initially focused on four constituencies, PTI soon demanded an investigation into 35 constituencies, popularly coined the "35 punctures" case. In 2015, PTI MNA Arif Alvi eventually apologized for inaccurately claiming these allegations, acknowledging that the "35 punctures" were not substantiated (Baig, 2022).

Amid mounting frustration with the judiciary's inaction, PTI announced an official anti-rigging campaign in April 2014. Alongside Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT), PTI launched the Azadi March and Inqilab March on August 14, 2014, aiming to pressurize the government. During these rallies, Khan called for a transparent investigation into the 2013 election fraud, demanded judicial inquiries, and urged electoral reforms, including electronic voting. His ultimate demands included the resignation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the dissolution of the current government, and the establishment of a caretaker government to facilitate new elections (Rehman, 2015). Other political parties and the government, however, viewed PTI's tactics as undemocratic. They accused Khan of acting under the influence of national and international powers and questioned his commitment to genuine democratic reform. While Khan claimed to challenge the elites, his critics noted his alliances with influential business figures. In response, the government formed negotiation committees, yet PTI persisted in demanding the Prime Minister's resignation (Rumi, 2014).

The sit-ins grew tense as PTI supporters attempted to storm the Parliament and state broadcaster PTV, compelling the government to convene a joint parliamentary session. Opposition parties like the Awami National Party (ANP) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) sided with the government, citing their commitment to democracy despite any reservations about PML-N's leadership. Attempts by Jamaat-e-Islami to mediate failed as PTI maintained its stance. During this period, PTI leader Javed Hashmi publicly criticized Khan's alignment with military interests, claiming that Khan sought unconstitutional shortcuts and was backed by General Zaheer-ul-Islam, the then ISI chief. Hashmi's statements led him to resign from PTI (Mehmood, 2022). This alleged support from the military aimed to pressurize Nawaz Sharif's government, especially due to his initiation of treason charges against former President General Musharraf (Christophe, Pakistan at the Crossroads Domestic Dynamics and External Pressure, 2016).

In 2018, allegations of rigging resurfaced when PTI won the elections, with parties like the PML-N and PPP voicing strong reservations. Although both parties reluctantly joined the Parliament, their leaders openly criticized the electoral outcome. PPP's Bilawal Bhutto Zardari referred to the PTI government as "selected" in his inaugural speech, reflecting widespread skepticism about the election's fairness.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman, however, refused to join Parliament, accusing the military establishment of orchestrating PTI's victory. His discontent led to the 2019 Azadi March, demanding PM Khan's resignation and fresh elections (Mehmood, 2022).

Fazlur Rehman further spearheaded the formation of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a grand alliance of opposition parties, in 2020. This alliance mobilized against the PTI government, culminating in the eventual ousting of Imran Khan through a vote of no confidence in April 2022 (Abass, 2024).

Political Instability Following the 2013 Elections

In western democracies, stability relies on mutual respect, consultation, and acceptance between ruling and opposition parties. However, in Pakistan, opposition parties often act contrary to this by opposing for the sake of opposition, both within and outside the parliament, leading to prolonged political instability over the past decade (Isthephen Leotski, 2018).

Political instability, especially in developing nations, obstructs development and worsens socio-economic conditions. After the 2013 general elections in Pakistan, the PTI and PAT led a 126-days sit-in that severely disrupted government functions, particularly in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. This event echoed trends from the 1990s when opposition parties attempted to topple governments by aligning with the president's power under Article 58(2B), undermining public confidence in the democratic process (Dawood Mammon, etal, 2017).

Between 2013 and 2018, PTI, rather than acting as a constructive opposition, resorted to street protests, rallies, and strikes, raising allegations of electoral rigging in the 2013 elections. This escalated after the 2014 Model Town incident, where protests by PAT led to fatalities, intensifying anti-government sentiments. PTI and PAT's aggressive protests, which included breaking into Islamabad's PTV building and the Parliament House, were televised, fueled by speeches from leaders like Imran Khan and Tahir-ul-Qadri, calling for civil disobedience and tax boycotts, actions criticized as unconstitutional (Mehmood, 2022). PTI's vice-president, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, announced mass resignations from PTI's parliamentary members, criticizing the parliament as "fake" except their party members. This stance was condemned as 'hypocritical' and 'fascist' by political opponents (Khalid, 2023). PTI's confrontational approach led to the demonization of media and institutions, and Pakistan's international reputation suffered (Safi, Saleem, 2021).

The prolonged sit-in impacted Pakistan's economy, stalling key international negotiations and causing the postponement of the Chinese president's visit to sign the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) agreement, leading to economic losses estimated from Rs. 500 million to Rs. 610 billion (Christophe, Pakistan at the Crossroads Domestic Dynamics and External Pressure, 2016).

Political instability re-emerged in 2016 with the Panama Papers case against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, which eventually led to his disqualification. Critics argued that Sharif's resignation prior to the inquiry could have preserved democratic stability

(Masood, 2024). Sharif's subsequent "respect for the vote" campaign criticized the judiciary and military establishments, signaling increased polarization (Masood, Salman, 2024).

The 2017 Faizabad sit-in by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) demanding the law minister's resignation over electoral reforms further damaged Pakistan's image. This episode illustrated how religious groups could seize the capital for extended periods, reflecting a lack of government control (Amin, 2023).

Civil-military tensions remained a central issue, with strained relations following the Dawn Leaks controversy and Panama Papers case, which fueled rumors of a coup. Rather than supporting the civilian government, PTI escalated its opposition by threatening to "lock down" Islamabad and demanding Sharif's resignation (Beg, 2022).

The 2022 political crisis was marked by repeated rallies, threats of destabilization, and PTI's unsubstantiated claims of foreign intervention against Imran Khan. This led to a volatile political climate, with the risk of martial law looming as the government struggled to manage both opposition protests and economic challenges (Hussain M. , 2023).

In Punjab, political and administrative crises induced the political instability. During that days of political crisis (2022) the country's largest province continued to present the scene of political and administrative turmoil. Sometimes the assembly became a battlefield and inside the assembly building the police had to be called, sometimes the speaker and deputy speaker of the provincial assembly were subjected to violence, and sometimes the Governor refused to take the oath from the chief minister and his cabinet. For a long time, the province was running without a Governor and members of the government and the opposition were clashing on the floor of the assembly. The situation in Punjab was a reflection of the country's political and administrative situation (Dawn, 2022).

Economic challenges worsened amid this political turmoil. The coalition government's borrowing and inflation doubled, increasing poverty levels and further straining public trust. PTI's unilateral dissolution of the Punjab and KP assemblies, intended to trigger fresh elections, only deepened political uncertainty (Hussain M. , 2023).

In summary, Pakistan's political instability since 2013 reflects a deeper struggle between democratic principles and oppositional tactics. Saleem Safi aptly noted that "political stability is the foundation of progress and development for a state. But unfortunately, even if having strong government in Pakistan, the political system did not stem on firm footing and actually this is the matter of serious concern. You can say clearly about the elections and system of other countries like Iran, Turkey, India etc. but no one is sure in Pakistan about the future elections and their results and repercussions. Pakistan's political future remains uncertain amid these unresolved conflicts" (Safi, Saleem, 2021).

Intervention of Non-Political Actors in Pakistan's Democratic Processes

Political analysts widely agree that interference by Pakistan's establishment, including intelligence agencies, in political processes has significantly shaped the country's political dynamics, often to the detriment of democratic norms and stability. This interference has included coercing politicians to switch parties, influencing election outcomes, and supporting selected political figures over others, thereby destabilizing the democratic process (Mir, Hamid, 2023).

A major shift in Pakistan's politics occurred when Imran Khan, the chairman of PTI, gathered a massive crowd at Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore on October 30, 2011. This rally marked the beginning of a surge in PTI's popularity, drawing support from electable politicians, many of whom were allegedly persuaded by covert agencies to join PTI. Prominent political leaders, including Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Ghulam Sarwar Khan, Nazar Gondal, Jehangir Tareen, Umar Ayub, Pervez Khattak, Aleem Khan, Fawad Chaudhary, Azam Swati etc left their respective parties and joined PTI, significantly bolstering its ranks before the 2013 and 2018 general elections. Pervez Elahi, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q), publicly stated that his party was pressurized by the then-ISI chief, General Shuja Pasha, to support PTI, further illustrating the establishment's involvement in shaping political alliances (Christophe, Pakistan at the Crossroads Domestic Dynamics and External Pressure, 2016).

The military establishment's influence became especially apparent during the political realignment in Balochistan in 2017, when the ruling PML-N was splintered to create the Balochistan BAP, which subsequently supported PTI in the formation of the federal government after the 2018 elections. Similarly, Jehangir Tareen, a key PTI leader, reportedly secured the support of independent members of the Punjab Assembly to ensure PTI's control of the province, highlighting the establishment's role in ensuring PTI's political dominance (Zehra, Ailia, 2023).

Political experts like Saleem Safi have noted that parties such as PML-Q, PTI, and BAP have frequently undermined elected governments in alignment with establishment directives. Despite political tensions and attempts to subvert civilian authority, the 2008-2013 civilian government managed to complete its term—an achievement viewed as a significant milestone in Pakistan's democratic history. However, the 2014 PTI-led protests, widely seen as backed by the establishment, attempted to destabilize the government through prolonged demonstrations and civil disobedience campaigns. Nevertheless, a coalition of political forces within and outside Parliament managed to safeguard the democratic setup, allowing it to survive another full term until 2018 (Safi, Saleem, 2021).

Beyond overt political influence, the judiciary has also played a role in the destabilization of civilian governments. In 2012, the Supreme Court disqualified Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani of the PPP on contempt charges, following his refusal to reopen corruption cases against President Asif Ali Zardari. This set a precedent for judicial involvement in political matters, further illustrated in 2017

when the Supreme Court disqualified Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on charges of undeclared assets. Many PML-N supporters argued that Sharif's disqualification was selective justice and motivated by his political standoff with the military establishment. The case against Sharif followed the "Dawn Leaks" controversy, in which a report on Pakistan's support for certain militant groups reportedly angered military leadership. This incident contributed to a perception that the judiciary was influenced by or acting in alignment with the establishment's interests, further intensifying civilian-military tension (Afzal M. , 2018).

Political leaders such as, Imran Khan, in his earlier political career, openly questioned the intervention forces in managing the leaderships inside political parties. According to him "the powerful forces bring those politicians to upper level i.e. government who are easily controlled". This is the major reason that a natural leadership was not born in this country. Here we can say that how much the politicians are weak and on the mercy of the strong establishment. It also indicates that how much the establishment is involved in managing the court cases against politicians. The first problem that existed in our political and democratic system is the interference of establishment in political and civilian affairs. Secondly, the weak nature of political forces and their extreme wish for power at any cost and through any way. So they seek the support of establishment for the acquisition of power. In such scenario when establishment supported a party to bring it to government, the opposition parties criticized the role of establishment in such milieu whereas the party in government praised the establishment. When the deep hand supported another party, then the same party which had nexus with it before, now criticized the role of establishment loudly. There is no consensus among political parties for civilian and parliament supremacy. The usage phenomenon of one party against another is a big hurdle in democratic and institutional development in Pakistan. When Nawaz Sharif was ousted from the government, he very powerfully mobilized the people against the establishment. On the other hand when PTI, and its leadership supported the verdict of judiciary as fair one. Even they prayed *Nawafil* and distributed sweets in jubilation of getting rid the country of corrupt ruler. When Imran Khan's government was ousted through parliamentary procedure, he and his party started fiery campaign against the interruptive role of the establishment. So the dependency of almost all political parties on establishment is the spotted and dark face of the Pakistani politics. Many political experts agree that regime uncertainty in Pakistan is linked with the unnecessary interference of establishment in the civilian affairs. Politically a certain and conducive environment is attached with the retreat of military establishment to the barracks and vice versa (Mariam Mufti, etal , 2020).

The presence of hardline religious groups has further complicated the political landscape. Due to the presence of fundamentalist religious groups like Tehreek i Labaik (TLP), the democratic culture and democracy did not stay on its footings. According to Dr. M. Iqbal (academician) "the religious factions like TLP, are the

sleepers cells of the establishment. They are used when needed. After the removal of PM Sharif, PML-N, his party had become totally against the establishment. So, in order to weaken the PML-N sitting government and to break and decrease their vote bank in the coming elections, the TLP under the leadership of Khadim Hussain Rizvi marched towards Rawalpindi and Islamabad on the plea that the federal government had changed the oath taking document” (Iqbal D. M., 2023). Intelligence agencies transformed their protest into sit-in at Faiz Abad which lasted for twenty days. The Dharna, sit-in, was given full coverage by the media upon the dictation of secret agencies. “The ex- PEMRA Chairman Absar Alam argued that he was pressurized by unknown person to open the transmission of 92 News, as their channel was regularly on-airing the protest of TLP which he paused”. The role of establishment was more elaborated, when the sit-in came to an end after the interference of military officials. The law minister Zahid Hamid was removed from his post. The suspicious act of in-service military officials were criticized later by the civil society and judiciary as well. The same person and the so called political party once again started march towards Islamabad to pressurize the government of Imran Khan to deport the ambassador of France due to the incident of blasphemy. However, this time the spy agencies did not want to topple or weaken or giving caution to the sitting government as the establishment was on the same page with Imran Khan led coalition government. So, his march of protest was stopped, and he was sent to jail (Hussain M. , 2023).

The unresolved Asghar Khan Case, in which high-ranking military officials were implicated in election manipulation, continues to highlight the challenges to civilian supremacy in Pakistan. The Supreme Court’s 2012 ruling implicated several top military and secret agencies figures in financing political campaigns to defeat the PPP in the 1990 elections. However, political leaders have hesitated to implement the ruling fully, fearing backlash from the establishment. Journalists like Hamid Mir have argued that implementing this verdict would be a crucial step toward ending military interference in politics, yet successive governments have failed to do so, largely due to their own reliance on establishment support (Mir, Hamid, 2023).

Pakistan’s persistent cycle of political instability, according to political analysts, is “deeply intertwined with the establishment’s influence over civilian affairs. Instead of uniting for the cause of civilian supremacy, political parties often vie for the establishment’s favor, undermining democratic institutions in the process. Until the establishment refrains from political interference and political parties develop internal democratic norms, Pakistan’s democracy will remain vulnerable to external manipulation. As noted by prominent journalists and analysts, the durability of Pakistan’s democratic institutions hinges on political parties and leaders prioritizing democratic integrity over short-term gains” (Shah S. M., 2023).

Matti ullah Jan, a renowned journalist opined that “the relationship between Pakistan’s military establishment and civilian leadership remains a defining characteristic of the country’s political landscape. The pervasive influence of the establishment has

hindered the development of a stable and autonomous democratic process. Without concerted efforts from both civilian and military stakeholders to respect constitutional boundaries, the cycle of interference, political dependency, and regime instability is likely to continue, undermining the prospects for sustained democratic governance in Pakistan. If the establishment has to atone for its mistakes, it has to make General Bajwa and General Faiz Hameed sit and admit the mistakes and wrongdoings in a live press conference and ex-Chief Justice Saqib Nisar and others should apologize publically instead of hiding. Moving a little more to the past, then General Pasha and General Zaheer ul Islam should also be brought to justice” (Jan M. u., 2023).

Supremacy of Parliament

Parliament symbolizes national unity, pride, and sovereignty of the state. It is the representative body that reflects the national character and collective psyche, determining the priorities for national life. In this institution, opposition is respected, loyalty to the state is valued, and criticism is tolerated. Historically, the sovereignty of Parliament, like democracy in Pakistan, has faced significant challenges. The parliament has been suspended under military rule for extended periods: 1958-62, 1969-71, 1977-1985, and 1999-2002. It was effectively incapacitated by the controversial Article 58(2) (b) for almost nineteen years, from 1985 to 1997 and again from 2003 to 2010 under 17th amendment. During these times, the representational character of the legislature suffered greatly. Legislative processes were undermined by presidential ordinances issued under Article 89 of the Constitution. From 1973 to 2002, different governments issued a total of 1,774 ordinances: 680 by President Zia, 954 by Musharraf, 16 by civilian governments, and 140 by caretaker administrations. Particularly, the PTI government alone issued 51 ordinances within its first two and a half years, constituting 55% of all federal legislation. By April 2022, this number rose to 77, leading opposition leaders, including Shahbaz Sharif, Raza Rabbani, Usman Kakkar, and Ghous Bakhsh Bazenjo, criticized this practice as indicative of civilian martial law and a hybrid democratic setup. The reliance on such ordinances, rather than passing bills through parliament, raises serious questions about the government's commitment to democracy (Dawood Mammon, etal, 2017).

The leadership of Yousaf Raza Gillani and Raja Pervez Ashraf during the PPP regime is often seen as exemplary in comparison to Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan. The presence of the Prime Minister in parliament significantly impacts legislative affairs. Unfortunately, from 2018 to April 2022, Imran Khan and his cabinet members attended parliamentary sessions infrequently, despite repeated calls for accountability from other members. The 2014 dharna (sit-in) politics created political instability, yet opposition parties such as the PPP, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), and Awami National Party (ANP) demonstrated maturity by supporting democracy and the government both inside and outside parliament. The potential for sustained democratization largely depends on the unity of civilian political leaders, which can prevent the military from exploiting political divisions and interfering in governance. During the political crisis,

these parties performed their roles effectively (Waseem M. , Political Conflict in Pakistan, 2021).

Parliament is synonymous with legitimacy, which is respected across the civilized world. However, in Pakistan, the concept of public mandate is often viewed negatively, undermining the democratic process. United parliamentary forces can achieve significant progress for the country, as demonstrated by the unanimous decision to halt NATO supplies for 26 days following the Salala incident in 2011. Parliament also played a crucial role in combating terrorism by passing the 21st amendment with the consensus of majority parties. Similarly, the government and opposition successfully passed the 22nd, 23rd, and 25th amendments in the public interest, highlighting the parliament's ability to address public needs collectively. During the Yemen-Saudi conflict, a joint session of parliament was convened to adopt a neutral stance, and following the revocation of Kashmir's special status on August 5, 2019, parliament passed a resolution to restore the territory's sovereignty (Beg, 2022).

There was very uncertain situation when Nawaz Sharif was disqualified under article 62(f) by the supreme court of Pakistan. The parliament again through majority vote elected the Muslim League nominated candidate as Prime Minister of Pakistan for the remaining period of term. The yearly reports of parliament shows that different committees are working both in Senate and National Assembly which are represented by both the treasury and opposition benches on proportionality basis depends upon the number of seats of a party inside the parliament. From 2010 after eighteen amendment the chairmanship of the public account committee remained with the opposition leader for better accountability purposes. But it is very unfortunate to say that during Imran Khan's administration this important chair was not given to the opposition leader, on the plea that he is under trial in so many corruption cases. In Punjab the PTI as ruling party did not give the chairmanship to the opposition (Waseem M. , 2021).

The configuration of the power elite ruling the country after 2013 was based on a consensus on the issue of parliamentary sovereignty. However under Imran Khan, the 2018-onward parliament lost its credibility for two reasons. First the impression of rigging the 2018 elections was endorsed by the national and international media along with opposition parties. Under these circumstances the National Assembly and the leader of the house were considered selected rather than elected. Second the powerful establishment of Pakistan carried the image of kingmaker in term of PTI Government's power and privilege even while article 58-2b was no longer on the statute book. Most of the political experts' coined hybrid for PTI led coalition government. During this period decision making right was not with the cabinet but it was controlled and dictated by the establishment. Imran Khan confessed it live in a speech on PTI social media channel after his government was removed through vote of no confidence. But its opponents criticized him that if he was powerless by that

time, why he did not resign from the seat in front of the representatives of parliament. If he had done so, his name will come as brilliant man in record book for parliamentary supremacy. During this period, decision-making authority resided with the establishment rather than the cabinet. Imran Khan publicly acknowledged the military's involvement in governance, particularly in passing federal budgets and making key constitutional appointments, confirming the hybrid governance model that emerged following the 2018 elections. This situation highlights how parliament was marginalized (PILDAT, 2022).

During the tenure of Khan, majority of the key posts in the government were occupied by technocrats and ex-military officers. Noor Alam Khan (ex-MNA from PTI) told the author that “our cabinet consisted of those people who had no relations with party nor with the parliament. Though we have many qualified persons in the parliament as ruling party but unfortunately Imran Khan selected the Para shooters, which I say total injustice and mistreatment with parliamentarians who come to the NA after getting thousands of votes from masses” (Khan N. A., 2023).

According to Mohsin Dawar (ex- MNA from 2018-2023) “during the PTI led government the lower house of the parliament was run through a retired colonel. Every bill and question of parliamentarians was filtered first from the office and then legislations and point of order were to be made. The Speaker of NA, Asad Qaiser was puppet in the hand of establishment. When somebody talked about the missing persons or other sensitive issues he might pause the mic of him. Production order is the discretionary power of Speaker, but unfortunately Asad Qaiser did not issue the production order of Ali Wazir (MNA from South Waziristan) because he did not want the displeasure of the establishment. He even did not issue the production order of the said MNA on the day of budget passage. To represent his people and put his saying on this important day was the basic and constitutional right of him but unfortunately he was not given the chance” (Dawar, 2023).

The PTI-led coalition government was characterized by severe conflicts with opposition parties, particularly the PML-N and the PPP. The Constitution mandates that the Prime Minister consult with the opposition leader on appointments like the Chief Election Commissioner; however, they failed to meet even once during this period. Additionally, both parties neglected to engage with parliament on vital policies aimed at stabilizing the economy and governance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif proposed a charter of economy, which was ignored by the government. Similarly, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari made constructive suggestions regarding economic stability, but these were also disregarded (Dawn, Pakistani Opposition Party Criticized For Supporting Army Chief’s Extended Term , 2020).

PML-N during PTI led government rallied behind the slogan “Respect the vote” to assert civilian supremacy and push for an end to the military’s manipulation of politics. But unfortunately both the major opposition parties- PML-N and PPP, supported

legislation that extended the Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa's term until November 2022, further entrenching military influence in civilian affairs. This support was widely criticized in mainstream media, with commentators arguing that the PML-N had betrayed its own supporters by abandoning the "respect the vote" principle in favor of political expediency (Dawn, Pakistani Opposition Party Criticized For Supporting Army Chief's Extended Term , 2020).

Opposition figures like Mohsin Dawar and Mushtaq Ahmad Khan voiced strong criticism of the military's interference in legislative processes. Dawar argued that laws should not be amended to serve personal interests, warning that such actions undermine the struggle for civilian supremacy. The actions of the PML-N and PPP demonstrate how both parties have aligned with military interests, effectively compromising their previous anti-establishment narratives (Mir, Hamid, 2023).

The political elite often champions parliamentary and civilian supremacy while in opposition but neglects these principles when in power. For instance, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif did not attend a single Senate meeting in his first two and a half years, a pattern that continued with Imran Khan and Shehbaz Sharif, who similarly avoided engaging with the Senate. This hypocrisy highlights the gap between political rhetoric and actual practice concerning parliamentary sovereignty (Hussain M. , 2023).

The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), formed on the basis of a commitment to civilian and parliamentary supremacy, ultimately mirrored the PTI government's shortcomings. Both major parties within the coalition surrendered civilian space to the military, hindering the restoration of lost parliamentary authority. The challenges of restoring such authority require a strong will, yet neither the government nor the opposition made genuine efforts to reclaim it (Lodhi, Maleeha, 2024).

Development of Political Parties and the Politics of Consensus

Political parties in Pakistan often function as family enterprises, centering on personalities rather than coherent ideas and ideologies. For instance, the PPP is largely considered a party of the Bhutto family, with leadership consistently coming from the same lineage. Similarly, the PML-N has been led by the same individuals since its inception. The Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) has been under the leadership of Maulana Fazlur Rehman since the passing of his father, while the ANP is now in its fourth generation under the grandson of Wali Khan. These major political parties hold a larger stake in Pakistan's democracy compared to smaller parties; however, they lack internal democracy. Intra-party elections in these parties are typically based on nominations, with the exception of the JI, which follows a proper intra-party election process (Dawood Mammon, etal, 2017).

Many of these parties are led by landlords and businessmen from various tribes and biradaris (clans), operating in a patron-client manner. Such symbiotic relationships primarily benefit these powerful elites rather than the general populace, undermining democracy in Pakistan. Although the PPP and the PTI initially embraced leftist and rightist populist ideologies, respectively, they soon succumbed to the influence of

powerful politicians known as electable. During Imran Khan's rise from 2010 to 2018, numerous electable from the PPP, PML-N, and other parties joined the PTI, fundamentally altering its ideological foundation. However, many of these political opportunists abandoned the PTI during its political struggles, leading to significant instability in 2022. Jahangir Tareen, a wealthy politician, admitted that he financed large political gatherings and brokered deals with independent members of the National and Provincial Assemblies to establish PTI governments at the federal level and in Punjab after the 2018 general elections (Akhtar, 2022).

In the period leading up to the 2018 elections, two general elections and three Senate elections occurred, but no major party awarded tickets to their ordinary workers, except for a few rare exceptions. Oligarchic elites not only occupy key roles within these parties but also secure ministerial positions after elections. During Nawaz Sharif's tenure, he distributed significant portfolios among family members, a practice that was frequently criticized by Imran Khan, who labeled it a "kingdom government." Similarly, during Imran Khan's government, portfolios were distributed to opportunistic politicians, dual nationality members of parliament, and technocrats, resulting in little change for a party that claimed to be a harbinger of change (Masood, Salman, 2024).

The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government, despite lasting for only 16 months, had a cabinet comprising nearly one hundred members as Shahbaz Sharif accommodated all coalition partners amid a fragile economic situation. Such actions fostered distrust among political workers and the general populace towards democracy. During this period, the opposition was largely ineffective, with the PTI choosing to protest on the streets instead of engaging in parliamentary processes. Imran Khan's demands for immediate elections illustrated the personality-driven political culture and dictatorial tendencies of political parties in Pakistan. Hamid Mir argues that unless mainstream parties like PML-N, PPP, and PTI promote internal democracy and curb the dominance of personalities, they risk losing public support and becoming pawns of the establishment. He warns that these parties will continue to rely on the military for power rather than the electorate, perpetuating the status quo (Mir, Hamid, 2023).

Regarding consensus politics during the period from 2013 to 2022, the PPP and PML-N signed a crucial document known as the Charter of Democracy (COD) in 2006, aimed at curbing politics of animosity and confrontation. This consensual approach enabled them to oust Dictator Pervez Musharraf and enact the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which significantly strengthened parliamentary democracy. The first successful civilian rule was achieved through consensual politics, and numerous constitutional amendments (21st to 25th) were passed during the PML-N government (2013-2018) through consensus and parliamentary procedures. Unfortunately, opposition parties later adopted familiar tactics that undermined democracy outside parliament. The PML-N frequently attempted to weaken the consensus during the

PPP government (2008-2013), with Shahbaz Sharif, the then Chief Minister of Punjab, using derogatory language against the federal PPP government. The PML-N also obstructed the amendment of Articles 62 and 63 of the constitution, which were later employed to disqualify Nawaz Sharif in 2017. Nawaz Sharif was implicated in the Memo Gate Scandal against the PPP government, violating the fundamental principles of the COD (Mehboob, 2022). Following the 2013 elections, the PTI emerged as the third largest party, adopting an agitating style of politics that prevented the PML-N government from effectively governing the country through protests and social media campaigns. The PPP, as the major opposition party, supported the PML-N government against PTI's aggressive tactics but failed to collaborate on critical issues like Dawn Leaks and the Panama Papers scandal, ultimately resulting in a lack of cooperation against the military establishment. Nawaz Sharif's attempts to foster better relations with India faced backlash from the PPP and PTI and displeased the military, leading to accusations of treason against him. Following this, he altered his foreign policy. Between 2018 and 2022, the ruling PTI and opposition parties (PML-N and PPP, JUI) failed to address public issues through consensus, resulting in heightened animosity and victimization (Mehboob, 2022).

Political parties must prioritize democratic principles over personal interests. For instance, in 2019, during a no-confidence vote against Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani, fourteen senators from opposition parties defied their party lines in a secret ballot, complicating vote tracking. The opposition parties opposed PTI's attempt to eliminate secret balloting before the 2021 Senate elections, disregarding an essential aspect of the COD (Lodhi, Maleeha, 2024).

In a fragile democracy like Pakistan, destabilizing a government through illegal means undermines the entire democratization process. Following the 2018 general election, the JUI discouraged its candidates from joining parliament, instead urging the PPP and PML-N to topple Imran Khan's government through undemocratic methods. The opposition alliance, particularly the PPP and PML-N, should have allowed the PTI the opportunity to govern and let the electorate decide its fate in subsequent elections. However, the opposition's unwise decisions enabled the establishment to further dominate the political landscape (Hussain M. , 2023).

While the PPP and PML-N collaborated during their respective tenures to respect electoral mandates, the PTI accused the PML-N of rigging the 2013 elections, which eroded their commitment. From 2018 until the end of the PDM government, there was a complete disregard for electoral mandates, leading to a resurgence of confrontational politics reminiscent of previous civilian governments in the 1990s. Following its ousting from power, the PTI has faced significant challenges from the establishment over the last two years, viewing these issues as exclusively targeted against them. The question arises whether the establishment has been manipulating politics for a longer duration or merely over the past two years. The PTI must recognize that the establishment grew stronger during its governance, further

entrenching the hybrid model during the PML-N-led PDM government. Consequently, the process of democratization was significantly hindered from 2013 to 2022 due to a lack of consensus among political parties on numerous occasions (Beg, 2022).

Un-Parliamentary and Inflammatory Rhetoric

The politics of hatred in Pakistan began in the 1990s, characterized by a rising tide of blame and hostility. However, the past decade has seen a troubling escalation in this behavior, particularly with the PTI adopting a more aggressive stance toward its opponents. Previously, the PPP and the PML-N exchanged harsh accusations, occasionally directing their ire at the military establishment. For instance, former President Asif Zardari openly criticized military leadership, igniting a charged political atmosphere. Similarly, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif directly targeted military figures, contributing to the hostility between the major political parties. At one rally, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif threatened to drag Zardari through the streets, showcasing the increasing aggression in political rhetoric (Hussain M. , 2023).

Imran Khan, during his tenure as Prime Minister, frequently employed harsh language against his political rivals. Notably, he directed vitriolic comments at Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman, repeatedly referring to him as "Diesel" in public forums. This derogatory name-calling had dire consequences, as members of the JUI retaliated with personal attacks on Khan's family, reflecting the toxic political environment. JUI leaders also accused Khan of being a "Jewish agent" due to his former marriage (Lodhi, Maleeha, 2022).

Khan's animosity extended to Maryam Nawaz, daughter of Nawaz Sharif, further perpetuating a cycle of hate among party leaders. This behavior influenced other PTI members, including Shahbaz Gill and Murad Saeed, who made disparaging remarks about Nawaz Sharif's family. In response, PPP leaders launched their own attacks on PTI figures, targeting their women during parliamentary sessions and public events. Former Health Minister Abdul Qadir Patel from PPP made particularly harsh accusations against Murad Saeed, which were met with approval from opposition members, indicating a toxic atmosphere in the assembly (Mir, Hamid, 2023).

This cycle of hostility also infiltrated the Senate, where former Senator Mushahidullah Khan of PML-N insulted ex- Federal Information Minister Fawad Chaudhary, leading to further verbal altercations. Sheikh Rasheed, known for his blunt remarks, frequently attacked the then-Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto, referring to him as "Bilu Rani." Such personal attacks have proliferated, blurring the lines between political opposition and personal vendettas. Notably, this uncivil behavior extends beyond the National Assembly and Senate into provincial assemblies, where personal attacks have become commonplace (Hussain M. , 2023).

The polarization among the public has also intensified, as demonstrated when PTI supporters chanted "chor chor" (thieves) at Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and his cabinet members during a religious pilgrimage at Masjid Nabvi (Medina). Such actions

illustrate the extent of intolerance among the populace toward political leaders, with the seeds of hatred being sown by party leadership. These toxic behaviors inhibit the political and democratic processes in the country (Lodhi, Maleeha, 2022).

The current political climate in Pakistan is alarming, as political elites foster an environment of mutual hatred and intolerance. As political differences evolve into personal animosities, the potential for conflict and tragedy looms large if this conduct continues (Mir, 2023).

Accountability and Political Victimization

Accountability is a fundamental component of democracy; without it, democracy cannot exist. In advanced democracies, strong checks and balances are crucial for maintaining accountability. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, the executive apparatus like the Public and Representative Office Disqualification Act (PRODA), Public Offices Disqualification Order (PODO) and institutions like the Accountability Commission (AC), and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) have been manipulated by the government to suppress opposition voices. In the 1990s, elected governments of the PPP and PML-N faced dismissal by the President on corruption charges. In response, Nawaz Sharif established the Accountability Commission in 1997 (Nizami, 2022).

Senator Saifu Reman from PML-N became the first head of the commission and began targeting leaders of opposition parties. Consequently, the commission became colloquially known as Ihtesabu Rehman. Tragically, both the PPP and PML-N engaged in forging cases against one another during this period. Pervez Musharraf, advocating for a corruption-free Pakistan, created the NAB, which then pursued cases against both PPP and PML-N leadership. However, between 2008 and 2018, the NAB largely refrained from prosecuting politicians, except for a case against former President Asif Zardari called the “fake account case” in 2015. The political landscape changed drastically during the Imran Khan regime from 2018 to 2022 and in the following sixteen months of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government (Hussain M. , 2023).

Under the PTI government, the NAB and other institutions were aggressively employed against opposition leaders such as Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz, Shahbaz Sharif, Asif Zardari, and many others. One of the most severe allegations was against Rana Sanaullah, President of the PML-N Punjab wing, who faced accusations from the Anti-Narcotics Force for possessing 15 kg of heroin. He spent six months in prison as a result. Although Pakistan showed signs of stability and economic recovery in 2018, the ongoing drama of accountability, political imprisonment, and ineffective policies led to lost opportunities for further progress. Qadir Patel from the PPP remarked, “By God, one of a stable country was handed over to the PTI-led government, but what they did for its further progress was nothing except economic deterioration” (Patel, 2020).

The NAB has become so politicized that it is often viewed not as a state institution but as an instrument of the ruling party. It has consistently been used by sitting

governments against opposition parties, demonstrating an inability to effectively prosecute figures like Zardari, famously known as Mr. Ten Percent. Musharraf's tenure also saw an increase in corruption, with Pakistan's rank on the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) reflecting this decline (Siddiqua, 2013).

Imran Khan frequently accused the PML-N, PPP, JUI, and ANP of corruption during his rallies, promising a corruption-free society within ninety days. However, he was unable to deliver on this promise during his three-and-a-half-year tenure, and corruption increased (Lodhi, Maleeha, 2024). According to Amnesty International, Pakistan slipped to 140 from 130 on the corruption index over the past two decades. Despite the PTI-led government's stated commitment against corruption, the number on the index worsened during its term. Furthermore, the PTI government filed a presidential reference against Justice Qazi Faiz Isa, responding to his critical verdict in the Faiz Abad sit-in case. PTI ministers not only challenged this case in the Supreme Court but also sought to tarnish his reputation in the media. Despite significant pressure, Justice Isa ultimately prevailed in court, and the PTI government later admitted that the case had been filed at the military's behest (Zehra, Ailia, 2023).

Corruption among high-profile government officials or their relatives often goes unpunished, as employees fear dismissal for exposing wrongdoing. As a result, anti-corruption institutions frequently overlook the misconduct of prominent figures. Despite allegations of corruption against politicians from Nawaz Sharif to Asif Zardari, many have been acquitted by Pakistani courts. Notably, Nawaz Sharif faced various cases from 1999 until 2017 but was cleared of all charges in 2023-24. This indicates that the NAB is utilized for political maneuvering rather than genuine accountability. It appears to be a tool for undermining governments and aiding in political power shifts. Instances of media scrutiny, such as the online exposure of assets belonging to retired generals, have largely been ignored, while political corruption allegations dominate the discourse. This raises a critical question: can political parties legislate for comprehensive accountability when they regain power? This remains an unresolved issue (Hussain M. , 2023).

From 2018 to 2022, numerous politically motivated treason cases were initiated against opponents. For example, in October 2020, the government filed treason charges against Nawaz Sharif, his daughter Maryam Nawaz, and forty other PML-N leaders under section 124-A. In retaliation, former Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry was also convicted under the same law during Shahbaz Sharif's brief administration. Section 124-A was further applied against Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement leader Ali Wazir during Imran Khan's regime. Many civilian leaders, including former Prime Ministers and various activists, have been targeted under this law. A PPP opposition leader proposed abolishing section 124-A, which passed in the Senate but was obstructed in the National Assembly under the PTI government, illustrating the lack of progress in learning from past mistakes (Zehra, Ailia, 2023).

In addition to oppressive policies against political opponents, the Imran-led coalition government implemented strict measures against critical media personnel. Cases were brought against Mir Shakeel ur Rehman, owner of Geo and Jang Media Groups, and prominent journalist Hamid Mir faced harassment, leading to a nine-month ban on his program. Numerous journalists and human rights activists suffered under the PTI government, including Asad Toor, Irfan Siddiqui, and others (Mir, Hamid, 2023). In August 2021, journalists Amir Mir and Imran Shafqat were arrested for criticizing the military on social media, while PECA was invoked in the arrest of journalist Mohsin Baig in February 2022. Similarly, the PDM coalition government targeted journalists like Imran Riaz and Jamil Farooqi. Arshad Sharif, a journalist, was tragically shot dead in Kenya after fleeing Pakistan due to threats against his life. Following the PTI's ouster in April 2022, its members also faced reprisals. For instance, the residence of PTI social media head Arsalan Khalid was raided, and former minister Shahbaz Gill was arrested for making statements against the military. Similar allegations were directed at Senator Azam Swati in October 2022 and at young PTI supporter Sikander Zaman in February 2023, who was sentenced to three years in prison for a critical tweet. The PDM government further empowered the FIA to investigate and arrest individuals under PECA in November 2022 (BTI, 2024). The parliament has failed to enact laws protecting journalists, with no legislation introduced since 2011. In 2019, Pakistan ranked 142 in the Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without Borders, and this status declined further in 2023 due to increasing media restrictions. This pattern of oppression from successive governments suggests that expressing the truth is increasingly prohibited in Pakistan (Mir, Hamid, 2023).

Conclusion

The democracy of Pakistan entered a new phase when the PPP-led coalition government successfully completed its tenure. Although these five years were marked by poor governance, they also helped steer parliamentary democracy back on course. The Eighteenth Amendment is considered a revolutionary constitutional step taken by the country's major political parties, who engaged in reconciliatory politics. This period marked a historic achievement as the first civilian government completed its term, fostering optimism among democracy advocates that democracy would flourish in the country.

However, political instability soon returned after the 2013 general elections. Imran Khan and his political ally Tahir ul Qadri initiated dharna (sit-ins) to undermine democracy and the civilian government, actions widely viewed by analysts as anti-political and undemocratic. Although the government narrowly avoided dismissal, this upheaval severely impacted both democracy and the economy. Nawaz Sharif managed to restore the economy, but he was ultimately ousted from power through a court ruling, indicative of extra-parliamentary forces intent on thwarting civil governance.

Shahid Haqqan Abbasi completed the remaining tenure of the PML-N government, but the establishment reasserted control over the executive branch. The 2018 elections were manipulated in favor of Imran Khan, who had become a favored candidate of the establishment since 2011. This project, initiated by General Pasha, culminated in Khan's ascension to the prime minister ship. During this time, Khan labeled his political opponents as thieves and initiated numerous cases against them, leading to widespread political victimization. The opposition, particularly Moulana Fazlur Rehman, adopted an agitated political stance against Khan's government, uniting on the platform of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), which ultimately ousted him through a vote of no confidence.

As a result, political instability resurfaced, and the economy approached a critical state. Under Shahbaz Sharif's premiership, the opposition parties opted for fresh elections and governed under the slogan "save the state, not politics." However, like Khan's administration, they also engaged in political victimization against the PTI, who protested against what they termed an "imported government" installed by the United States. Although the PDM leaders prevented bankruptcy, democracy and the social fabric suffered due to their failure to hold timely elections in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and at the national level. The country once again regressed into minus-one and minus-a-party politics. Consequently, from Imran Khan to the PDM leaders, all parties utilized one another against their interests, ultimately reinforcing the establishment's power and weakening democracy. This period, spanning from 2018 to 2023, is therefore commonly referred to as the "hybrid regime."

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