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PAKISTAN'S DEMOCRATIC TRAJECTORY RECONSIDERED

Institutions, Governance, and State Transformation

SAEED SHAFQAT

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ABSTRACT

Today, Pakistan's democratic trajectory presents a compelling analytical puzzle. The country has experienced military intervention, constitutional reconstruction, judicial activism, federal restructuring, unprecedented media expansion, rapid urbanization, technological transformation, and repeated electoral contests. Yet despite these profound political and social changes, democratic politics has neither collapsed nor fully strengthened. Instead, Pakistan has evolved into a political system in which electoral competition, constitutional procedures, and representative institutions cohabit with enduring military hegemony, elite manipulation, and persistent weaknesses in political party organization. This evolution suggests that the principal question confronting scholars of Pakistan is no longer whether democracy can survive, but rather what kind of democracy; liberal, illiberal, hybrid, or electoral-authoritarian — has emerged, and why it has proven more durable than many earlier observers anticipated. This paper attempts to answer that puzzle.



INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's democratic experience has invariably been interpreted through the lenses of instability, military intervention, constitutional breakdown, and institutional fragility. Comparative and country-specific studies have generally portrayed Pakistan as oscillating between periods of civilian and military rule, with democratic governments repeatedly struggling to consolidate representative institutions and establish enduring constitutional norms. Yet such interpretations, while capturing important dimensions of Pakistan's political history, tend to emphasize episodes of institutional disruption rather than the longer-term processes through which political institutions evolve, adapt, and acquire legitimacy. They also underestimate the extent to which democratic practices and aspirations in Pakistan have displayed resilience despite recurring crises of governance, military intervention, judicial activism, adversarial civil-military relations, elite polarization, and political conflict.¹

When this author examined Pakistan's democratic experience in the late 1990s (*Democracy in Pakistan, Value Change and Challenges of Institution Building*, 1998), the principal concern was the persistent gap between professed democratic ideals and constitutional design, on one hand, and actual political practice, on the other. The argument advanced was that democratic consolidation depended not merely upon constitutions, elections, or formal institutions but upon the willingness of political elites to internalize democratic norms, strengthen representative institutions, and develop political parties capable of mediating competing social interests. Democratic institutions could not acquire legitimacy if political actors themselves remained committed to patronage, personalized authority, and extra-constitutional methods of resolving political conflict. The central challenge, therefore, was building representative institutions rather than simply restoring electoral politics.²

Nearly three decades later, Pakistan confronts a different but equally compelling puzzle. It has since undergone the same broad sweep of change; military intervention, constitutional reconstruction, judicial activism, federal restructuring, media expansion, urbanization, and repeated elections (Table 1 & 5) — yet democratic politics has neither collapsed nor been consolidated. Electoral competition and constitutional procedure now cohabit with enduring military hegemony, elite manipulation, and weak party organization. Despite these illiberal features, democratic sentiment and the aspiration for genuine democratic governance remain strong among Pakistanis.

¹ For an insightful analysis and critique of this theme, see Adeel Malik and Maya Tudor, "Pakistan's Coming Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2024): 69–83. Several other recent studies note the same complex and contradictory trends: Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011); Mohammad Waseem, *Political Conflict in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2024).

² Saeed Shafqat, "Democracy in Pakistan: Value Change and Challenges of Institution Building," *The Pakistan Development Review* 37, no. 4, pt. 2 (Winter 1998): 281–98. The original study emphasized the gap between democratic values and institutional practice and the importance of political parties and institution building; the argument was further refined in Saeed Shafqat, "Democracy and Political Transformation in Pakistan," in *Pakistan: The Contours of State and Society*, ed. Sofia Mumtaz and Jean-Luc Racine (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 209–33.

Evolution of Military-Hegemonic Electoral Democracy

This paper argues that Pakistan has gradually evolved into what may be described as a *military-hegemonic electoral democracy*. By this I mean a political order in which the acquisition and transfer of governmental authority derive their formal legitimacy primarily from constitutional procedures and regular elections, while the broader distribution and exercise of state power is shaped by the interaction of elected political leaders, parliament, the judiciary, bureaucracy, and a military establishment that retains a hegemonic position in national security, strategic planning, crisis management, and, more indirectly, the political ecosystem in which elections are conducted. Unlike various forms of authoritarianism, military-hegemonic electoral democracy accepts elections as the legitimate basis of political authority. Compared to substantive liberal democracy, however, it does not vest effective political supremacy exclusively in elected civilian institutions, nor has it fully institutionalized democratic norms within political parties and elite political behavior. Electoral contestation therefore coexists with allegations and practices of manipulation, extra-constitutional bargaining, personalized leadership, patronage, and corruption. The concept is intended not as a normative label but as an analytical description of the institutional landscape that has emerged in Pakistan.³

The key proposition I put forward here is that Pakistan's democratic evolution since 1999 has unfolded through two distinct but interconnected phases. The first, extending from the military intervention of October 1999 until the general elections of 2008, may be characterized as a period of *military-led hybrid democracy*. During this phase, military rule did not abolish representative institutions; rather, it sought to govern through them. The Devolution of Power Plan of 2001, local government elections, the general elections of 2002, the restoration of parliamentary institutions, and the formation of coalition governments reflected an effort to combine electoral legitimacy with an expanded military role in the politico-legal order. Constitutional amendments (the Eighth and Seventeenth, in particular), legal restructuring, and institutional engineering produced a hybrid political order in which electoral politics continued, but within parameters substantially engineered by the military establishment.⁴ Across the decades since independence, this relationship has moved through recognizable stages: civilian authority was marginal under

³ My earlier formulation of military hegemony provides the conceptual antecedent for the present formulation; see Saeed Shafqat, *Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: From Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Benazir Bhutto* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Lahore: Pak Book Corporation, 1997), 265–67.

⁴ The Eighth Amendment was passed during the martial-law regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and incorporated into the Constitution in November 1985. It fundamentally altered the parliamentary character of the 1973 Constitution by strengthening the office of the president. Its most significant provision was the insertion of Article 58(2)(b), which empowered the president to dissolve the National Assembly (and thereby dismiss the prime minister) at his discretion if, in his opinion, “a situation has arisen in which the Government of the Federation cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and an appeal to the electorate is necessary.” The amendment also validated all martial-law orders, ordinances, and actions taken between 1977 and 1985, expanded presidential powers of appointment, and shifted Pakistan toward a semi-presidential system. The Seventeenth Amendment was passed in December 2003 during the presidency of General Pervez Musharraf. It largely validated the Legal Framework Order (LFO) of 2002 and partially restored the president's power under Article 58(2)(b) to dissolve the National Assembly, subject to a reference to (and approval or veto by) the Supreme Court. The amendment also provided a mechanism for Musharraf's continuation in office through a vote of confidence in the electoral college, increased the size of the National and Provincial Assemblies, lowered the voting age to 18, and made other changes to the structure of Parliament and the provinces. These two amendments, together with the Eighth, were the main vehicles that shifted power from the prime minister and Parliament toward the president. Most of their key provisions were later repealed or diluted by the Thirteenth Amendment (1997) and, more comprehensively, by the Eighteenth Amendment (2010), which restored a parliamentary form of government.

Zia (1977–1988), fractured and adversarial through the 1990s power-sharing period (1988–1999), coalitional and dispersed under Musharraf (1999–2008), and constitutional, if constrained, after 2008 — while the military's own role shifted correspondingly from the fortification of a hegemonic order, to guardianship, to entrenchment, to what is best described today as strategic hegemony (see Table 6).

The second phase, beginning with the general elections of 2008 and continuing to the present, marks one of the most significant institutional developments in Pakistan's political history. Since 2008, Pakistan has experienced an uninterrupted sequence of national elections in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024, accompanied by regular elections to provincial assemblies, the Senate, and the presidency in accordance with constitutional provisions (see Table 1 & 2). Governments led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and subsequent coalition arrangements have all assumed office through electoral competition and constitutional procedures. At the same time, the disturbing practical reality is that each electoral cycle has been accompanied by allegations of manipulation by the 'establishment,' administrative deficiencies within the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), judicial intervention, and varying degrees of political contestation and yet the constitutional principle of transferring political authority through elections has remained intact. Since 2008, the peaceful transfer of power from one civilian, party-led government to another has become the emerging pattern of political succession.⁵ (See Table 4.)

This transformation deserves greater scholarly attention than it has thus far received. Much of the literature on Pakistan continues to frame democratic development in terms of democratic failure or recurring civil-military confrontation. While these dimensions remain important, they no longer satisfactorily explain the contemporary political order. The endurance of electoral institutions, repeated constitutional transfers of power, and the growing legitimacy of elections suggest that Pakistan has moved beyond the earlier cycle of interrupted democratic transitions. Electoral competition has become institutionalized, representative institutions have acquired greater continuity, and constitutional procedures have demonstrated a degree of elasticity that was largely absent during previous decades. At the same time, the legitimacy and credibility of the electoral process and its outcomes remain persistently challenged.⁶

Let me reiterate that electoral continuity should not be confused with democratic deepening. The routinization of elections has not been accompanied by a corresponding transformation of political culture (see Table 5 & 6). The attitude, behavior, and conduct of elected public officials remains, in most cases, autocratic or non-democratic. Political parties continue to function primarily as personalized and family-centered fiefdoms rather than internally democratic organizations. Leadership succession remains concentrated within a limited number of political families; candidate selection is dominated by patronage networks and 'electable candidates' rather than organizational procedures; internal party elections remain largely symbolic; and policy formulation

⁵ Saeed Shafqat, "Pakistan Elections 2018: An Analysis of Trends, Recurring Themes and Possible Political Scenarios," Discussion Paper (Centre for Public Policy and Governance, Forman Christian College, 2018); Ajay Darshan Behera, "Pakistan General Elections 2018: Clear Signs of a Guided Democracy," *International Studies* 55, no. 3 (2018): 238–52; Ashok K. Behuria and Ashish Shukla, "Making Sense of Elections in Pakistan: Challenges Galore," *Strategic Analysis* 48, no. 2 (2024): 131–44.

⁶ The ECP identifies Form 45 as the result of the count prepared at the polling station and publishes Form 47 as the provisional result. See Adeel Malik and Maya Tudor, cited above, note 1.

frequently yields to personality-based politics. The persistence of these characteristics reflects a broader continuity in elite political behavior that I had identified in my 1998 and 2002 studies: the paradox of Pakistan's democracy — professing democracy while practicing autocratic and narrow-minded politics — remains central to understanding Pakistan's democratic evolution.⁷

Equally significant is the continuing role of the military within Pakistan's political system. Since independence, the military has exercised influence extending beyond its conventional professional responsibilities, particularly in matters concerning national security, foreign policy, strategic planning, and crisis management. While the period since 2008 has witnessed sustained, party-led civilian government rather than direct military rule, the military has continued to occupy a hegemonic position within the broader political system. Civilian governments have tolerated — and, in effect, legitimized — this military hegemony while still exercising considerable authority over economic management, social policy, and legislative affairs; yet strategic decision-making has continued to involve institutional interaction between elected governments and military leadership. Pakistan's democratic experience therefore cannot be understood solely through conventional models of civilian supremacy or military authoritarianism. Rather, it reflects the evolution of a quasi-constitutional political order in which electoral legitimacy and military hegemony cohabit within an evolving institutional framework.

Therefore, in this article, I advance three interrelated arguments. First, Pakistan has undergone a significant transformation from recurrent military interventions to sustained constitutional-electoral continuity and increasingly regular transfers of governmental authority through elections and parliamentary procedures, despite persistent disputes over electoral outcomes. Second, the principal obstacles to democratic consolidation lie not only in the administration and credibility of elections but also in the internal character of political institutions: political parties remain organizationally weak, leadership remains highly personalized and dynastic, and parliamentary deliberation and democratic norms remain insufficiently institutionalized. Third, electoral democracy of this Pakistani variety continues to function within a broader political order in which the military occupies a hegemonic institutional position. Democratic consolidation therefore requires not only the democratization of political parties but also the institutionalization of civil-military relations, ensuring that all state institutions exercise authority within clearly defined constitutional boundaries and under the supremacy of the Constitution. The passage of the Twenty-Seventh Constitutional Amendment in 2025 has made this question more consequential by strengthening the constitutional position of the military command structure and concentrating authority within senior military leadership.⁸ At the same time, Pakistan's adroitly managed relations with the United States and China, and its expanding strategic relationships — including the 2025 Pakistan–Saudi Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement and the August 2026 Mecca Joint Defence Agreement involving Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye — have enhanced the military establishment's

⁷ Saeed Shafqat (1998, 2002)

⁸ Constitution (27th Amendment) Act, 2025. For contemporary assessments of its implications for the military command structure and constitutional balance, see Chatham House, "Pakistan's 27th Constitutional Amendment Moves It One Step Closer to Authoritarian Rule," December 2, 2025; Abid Hussain, "How Would Pakistan's 27th Amendment Reshape Its Military and Courts?" *Al Jazeera*, November 11, 2025.

external strategic credence. Writing in the *American Journal Foreign Affairs*, a Pakistani editor and reporter has aptly called it, “Strategic Integration: The military has institutionalized its domination rather than disguised it”, she continues in Pakistan’s new diplomacy,” it is the guarantor, negotiator and closer.”⁹ These developments do not, by themselves, legitimize military hegemony; rather, they create conditions in which the military’s institutional predominance may become more deeply embedded. My word of caution, therefore, is strategic as well as political: sustained external effectiveness cannot indefinitely compensate for domestic legitimacy deficits. If military predominance becomes excessive and too repressive, it may generate institutional strains within the state and deepen public alienation, thereby making the very hegemonic order it seeks to preserve more vulnerable to street protest, mass uprising, and eventual collapse.

Finally, this paper argues that Pakistan’s democratic challenge has fundamentally changed. Today, the more significant challenge is democratic deepening, improving governance, and strengthening the delivery of public services. The question is no longer whether elections should be held — they have become an accepted constitutional and political norm — but whether the institutions that contest, administer, and govern through elections can themselves become more democratic, capable, and accountable.

The experience of the past quarter century suggests that Pakistan has crossed an important politico-legal threshold. Electoral democracy has survived repeated crises; representative institutions have displayed greater resilience than anticipated; and constitutional continuity has become embedded within the political process. Whether these achievements culminate in a fully institutionalized democratic order will depend less upon the frequency of elections than upon the capacity of power elites, political parties, and state institutions; bureaucracy, military, and judiciary to embrace democratic values as the guiding principles of governance. *It is this transition — from electoral continuity to democratic fortification — that constitutes the central concern of this paper.*

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper adopts a historical-institutional, policy-centric approach that combines institutional analysis with the study of political behavior and institutional development. Rather than treating democracy as a binary condition, either present or absent, it examines the gradual evolution of political institutions across different historical phases. The analysis integrates electoral data, constitutional developments, parliamentary evolution, political party organization, and changing patterns of elite behavior to explain how democratic institutions have acquired elasticity despite persistent structural constraints. In doing so, it also seeks to bridge the gap between comparative theories of democratization and the distinctive trajectory of Pakistan’s political development.

⁹ Mehreen Zahra Malik, Pakistan ‘s Quiet Coup: The Making of a New Model of Military Rule (*Foreign Affairs*, November,28,2025) <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/pakistans-quiet-coup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/pakistans-quiet-coup>. Government of Pakistan and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement*, September 17, 2025; “Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan Pledge Mutual Defence as Middle East Turmoil Escalates,” *Reuters*, August 7, 2026. The August 2026 Mecca agreement extended the mutual-defence framework to Türkiye.

Literature Review: Interpreting Pakistan's Democratic Trajectory

The study of democracy in Pakistan has generated a rich body of scholarship spanning constitutional history, civil-military relations, political institutions, political parties, federalism, and governance. While these studies differ in their analytical approaches, they share a common concern with explaining why democratic institutions have struggled to achieve stability despite repeated transitions to elected government. Broadly speaking, the literature may be grouped into five interrelated strands: (1) the political history / constitutional-instability approach, (2) the praetorian approach, (3) the Marxian and neo-Marxian approach, (4) the political economy approach, and (5) the more recent literature on hybrid regimes and democratic resilience.

1. Political history / constitutional-instability approach. The earliest generation of scholarship primarily interpreted Pakistan's democratic experience through the lens of constitutional instability and institutional failings — for example, Keith Callard's *Pakistan: A Political Study* (1957), Khalid bin Sayeed's *Political System of Pakistan* (1967), G.W. Choudhury's *The Last Days of United Pakistan* (1974), Herbert Feldman's *Revolution in Pakistan* (1967), and Lawrence Ziring's *The Ayub Khan Era* (1971) and *Pakistan: Enigma of Political Development* (1980). These studies emphasized the fragility of representative institutions, recurrent constitutional crises, bureaucratic dominance, and the limited institutionalization of political parties during Pakistan's formative decades. Democracy was generally viewed as a project repeatedly interrupted by executive intervention, weak parliamentary traditions, and unresolved tensions between civilian leadership and bureaucratic-military institutions. Within this tradition, military interventions appeared as exceptional departures from an otherwise preferred parliamentary trajectory.¹⁰

2. Praetorian approach. A large body of research on Pakistan has been shaped by Samuel P. Huntington's theory of praetorianism and, equally, by S.E. Finer's account of the military's interventionist role. Both scholars treated military intervention as the principal explanatory variable in the comparative politics of developing states. This tradition is exemplified by Hasan Askari Rizvi's foundational study, *Military in Pakistan's Politics*, and extended by C. Christine Fair, Stephen Cohen, Shuja Nawaz, and Aqil Shah. These studies show how the military gradually evolved from a professional defense institution into the country's most influential political organization. Their analyses convincingly established that military influence extended well beyond periods of direct rule and increasingly shaped foreign policy, national security, economic management, and constitutional politics — demonstrating that military withdrawal from formal office did not necessarily imply the restoration of civilian supremacy.¹¹

¹⁰ Keith Callard, *Pakistan: A Political Study* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957); Khalid B. Sayeed, *The Political System of Pakistan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); G. W. Choudhury, *The Last Days of United Pakistan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974); Herbert Feldman, *Revolution in Pakistan: A Study of the Martial Law Administration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Lawrence Ziring, *The Ayub Khan Era: Politics in Pakistan, 1958–1969* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971); Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan: The Enigma of Political Development* (Folkestone, UK: Dawson, 1980).

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); S. E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962); Hasan Askari Rizvi, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan, 1947–1997*, 3rd ed. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2000); C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stephen P. Cohen, *The Pakistan Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008); Aqil Shah, *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

3. Marxian and neo-Marxian approach. This strand focuses on class contradictions and class struggle, emphasizing, in the Pakistani case, the landlord class's oppression of the peasantry and the dominant ethnic group's exploitation of smaller groups. Yu. V. Gankovsky's *A History of Pakistan* (1964) was followed by Hamza Alavi's influential essay 'The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh' (*New Left Review*, 1972), which characterized the state inherited from colonial administration as 'overdeveloped.' Subsequent contributions by Angus Maddison, Hassan Gardezi, Rashid Amjad, and Ayesha Jalal, among others, further examined the historical autonomy of state institutions inherited from colonial rule.¹²

4. Political economy approach. Joseph E. Stiglitz, the Nobel laureate, was among the first to write on Pakistan's political economy, in Manzooruddin Ahmed's edited volume *Contemporary Pakistan* (1974); He was followed by development economists Robert Looney, Nawab Haider Naqvi, and A.R. Kemal; and by the early work of Akmal Hussain, Shahid Kardar, and Rashid Amjad. Ayesha Siddiqi's *Military Inc.* and Rashid Amjad and Waqar Ahmed's *Managing Pakistan's Economy* extended the approach, as did the subsequent work of Omar Noman, Akbar Zaidi, and Shahid Javed Burki. Stanley Kochanek's *Interest Groups in Pakistan* combines interest-group theory with political economy; my own contribution, 'Public Policy and Reform in Pakistan: 1971–77,' falls within this tradition.¹³ These works emphasize how particular growth models entrenched 'functional inequality' and the military's role in the country's economic institutions. More recent governance-oriented scholarship has emphasized that Pakistan's democratic performance depends not only upon electoral competition but also upon administrative capacity, decentralization, public service delivery, provincial autonomy, and the effectiveness of regulatory institutions — for example, Ahsan Rana's *Hain Kawakab Khuch Aur* (in Urdu, 2024), is a trend setting book on Pakistan's political economy that provides an overarching insights on these issues. Others include, Anita Weiss and Saba Khattak's edited volume *Development Challenges Confronting Pakistan* (2013), and Rabia

¹² Yu. V. Gankovsky and L. R. Gordon-Polonskaya, *A History of Pakistan (1947–1958)* (Moscow: Nauka Publishing House, 1964); Hamza Alavi, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh," *New Left Review*, no. 74 (1972): 59–81; Angus Maddison, *Class Structure and Economic Growth: India and Pakistan since the Moghuls* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971); Rashid Amjad, *Industrial Concentration and Economic Power in Pakistan* (Lahore: South Asian Institute, Punjab University, 1974); Hassan Gardezi and Jamil Rashid, eds., *Pakistan: The Roots of Dictatorship: The Political Economy of a Praetorian State* (London: Zed Press, 1983); Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹³ Joseph E. Stiglitz, "The Political Economy of Public Decision Making," in *Contemporary Pakistan: Politics, Economy, and Society*, ed. Manzooruddin Ahmed (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1980); Robert E. Looney, *The Political Economy of Pakistan: An Evaluation of Economic Policy Priorities* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Syed Nawab Haider Naqvi and A. R. Kemal, *Protectionism and Efficiency in Manufacturing: A Case Study of Pakistan* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991); Akmal Hussain, *Strategic Issues in Pakistan's Economic Policy* (Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1988); Shahid Kardar, *The Political Economy of Pakistan* (Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1987); Rashid Amjad, *Industrial Concentration and Economic Power in Pakistan* (Lahore: South Asian Institute, Punjab University, 1974); Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Rashid Amjad and Waqar Ahmed, eds., *Managing Pakistan's Economy: Fiscal, External and Investment Challenges* (Lahore: Lahore School of Economics, 2017); Omar Noman, *The Political Economy of Pakistan, 1947–85* (London: KPI, 1988); S. Akbar Zaidi, *Issues in Pakistan's Economy: Between Past and Future*, 3rd ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Shahid Javed Burki, *Pakistan: A Nation in the Making* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986); Stanley A. Kochanek, *Interest Groups and Development: Business and Politics in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1988); Saeed Shafqat, "Public Policy and Reform in Pakistan: 1971–77 — An Analysis of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Socio-Economic Policies," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 3 (1988): 37–56; Anita M. Weiss and Saba Gul Khattak, eds., *Development Challenges Confronting Pakistan* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2013); Rabia Chaudhry, *The Changing Dynamics of Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: Soldiers of Development* (London: Routledge, 2023). For a recent, refreshing and data driven analysis on these issues and possible future direction of Pakistan's political economy, see, Ahsan Rana, *Hain Kawakab Kuhch Aur...* (in Urdu, 2024)

Chaudhry's *The Changing Dynamics of Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan* (2023). This body of work redirected attention from regime type toward the quality of governance as an essential component of democratic consolidation.

5. Hybrid-regimes approach. Since the restoration of electoral politics in 2008, a fifth strand of scholarship has increasingly employed concepts such as 'hybrid regimes,' 'competitive authoritarianism,' 'managed democracy,' and 'electoral authoritarianism' to explain Pakistan's evolving political order. Comparative studies by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, Alfred Stepan (*Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone*, 1988), Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (*Competitive Authoritarianism*, 2010), Andreas Schedler (*Electoral Authoritarianism*, 2006), Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (*How Democracies Die*, 2018), and Larry Diamond ('How to End the Democratic Recession,' 2024; 'Is the Third Wave Over?,' 1997) have influenced analyses that describe Pakistan as occupying an intermediate position between liberal democracy and authoritarian rule — a hybrid political system. Elections remain competitive, opposition parties continue to participate, and constitutional institutions formally function, yet unelected institutions continue to exercise substantial influence over political outcomes. This comparative literature has proven particularly useful in explaining why democratic procedures coexist with significant constraints on civilian authority. Although these perspectives have substantially enriched understanding of Pakistan's political development, they also reveal important analytical limitations. Much of the earlier literature continues to interpret Pakistan's political evolution through a binary framework contrasting democracy with military rule, so that political change is understood as movement between two alternative regimes rather than as an evolving institutional configuration in which civilian and military institutions simultaneously exercise political authority. Similarly, much of the hybrid-regime literature remains primarily descriptive, classifying Pakistan within broader comparative typologies without sufficiently examining the specific institutional mechanisms through which constitutional governance and military predominance have become mutually embedded. The hybridity framework also tends to gloss over the creeping authoritarian tilt that such systems can manifest, under which democratic propensities are diminished or waylaid.¹⁴

This paper seeks to build upon, while moving beyond, these established approaches. Rather than asking whether Pakistan has become democratic, authoritarian, or hybrid, it examines how democratic institutions have adapted within an enduring configuration of military-hegemonic political order; an adaptation that remains convoluted and that suffers from serious inadequacies relative to what democratic consolidation demands. The empirical evidence presented through updated electoral, parliamentary, constitutional, and governmental data suggests that Pakistan has experienced neither democratic consolidation in the classical liberal sense nor a return to martial law or military dictatorship. Instead, constitutional government has gradually become

¹⁴ For a perceptive review of hybridity and hybrid regimes, see Mariam Mufti, "What Do We Know about Hybrid Regimes after Two Decades of Scholarship?" *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 2 (2018): 112–19; Alfred Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Larry Diamond, "How to End the Democratic Recession: The Fight against Autocracy Needs a New Playbook," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 6 (November/December 2024); Larry Diamond, "Is the Third Wave Over?" *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 3 (1997): 20–37.

institutionalized within a political order characterized by military hegemony over strategic domains of governance. This argument also draws upon an institutionalist and policy-analytic perspective: political order is shaped not only by formal constitutional rules but by the interaction of institutions, organizational interests, elite networks, and the wider international environment.¹⁵ Institutions, in this sense, are the conventions, norms, and authoritative rules; the humanly created constraints — that shape how actors interact. These arrangements can undergo incremental change, yet institutions also possess considerable ‘staying power’ and are correspondingly resistant to change. Institutional theory thus provides a framework for analyzing both formal and informal interactions between actors and the broader environment in which they operate.¹⁶ In this respect, my earlier work on military hegemony sought to move beyond a simple civil-versus-military dichotomy and to examine how military, bureaucratic, political, and economic elites were embedded within an evolving institutional landscape — an approach with resemblances to C. Wright Mills’s analysis of interconnected institutional elites, though distinct from Gramscian theories of hegemony.¹⁷ It also connects to the literature on bureaucratic-authoritarianism associated with Guillermo O’Donnell and to comparative work on transitions from authoritarian rule.¹⁸ Building upon my earlier work on military hegemony in Pakistan’s political development (1997 and subsequent writings), I therefore refine the concept of a *military-hegemonic political order* as an analytical framework for understanding Pakistan’s post-2008 political evolution. The concept does not imply continuous military rule, nor does it deny the growing significance of elections, constitutional transfers of power, parliamentary continuity, judicial activism, or provincial autonomy. Rather, it recognizes that these institutions increasingly operate within a political order in which the military remains the principal strategic institution influencing national security, crisis management, foreign policy, and broader state direction without necessarily assuming direct executive authority. The military’s role, in this formulation, is not simply to intervene in politics but to participate in constructing, reconstructing, and sustaining the political order itself.

This paper offers a reinterpretation of Pakistan’s democratic trajectory by demonstrating that the country’s political evolution is best understood as the institutionalization of electoral democracy within a military-hegemonic political order. Since 2008, constitutional procedures have acquired greater acceptability, parliamentary continuity has improved, coalition politics has gained legitimacy, and peaceful transfers of power have become increasingly regular. Yet these procedural democratic advances have unfolded within a broader political order characterized by continuing military hegemony over strategic state functions. This framework seeks to bridge the literatures

¹⁵ On the analysis of military, bureaucratic, and political elites, see Shafqat, *Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan*, cited above, note 3; and Saeed Shafqat, “Praetorians and People,” in *Pakistan: Beyond the ‘Crisis State,’* ed. Maleeha Lodhi (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95–113.

¹⁶ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956). The comparison here is analytical rather than genealogical: the present argument does not equate military hegemony with Gramscian hegemony.

¹⁸ Guillermo O’Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 51–65; Larry Diamond, “Elections without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 21–35. For a persuasive case for hybridity in Pakistan specifically, see Philip Oldenburg, “Loyalty, Disloyalty and Semi-Loyalty in Pakistan’s Hybrid Regime,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* (November 2016): 1–22.

on democratization, civil-military relations, governance, and hybrid regimes, while providing a more historically grounded explanation of Pakistan's constitutional and political development.

Reassessing Hybrid Political Order under Military Hegemony, 1999–2008

The military intervention of October 12, 1999, initially appeared to represent another interruption in Pakistan's recurring cycle of democratic breakdown. General Pervez Musharraf justified the removal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif by invoking familiar arguments concerning political instability, economic decline, institutional paralysis, and failures of civilian governance. At first glance, the coup resembled the military interventions of 1958 and 1977. In retrospect, however, the decade between 1999 and 2008 differed fundamentally from earlier periods of military rule. Rather than simply suspending democratic institutions, the Musharraf regime sought to redesign them. The objective was not the permanent replacement of constitutional politics but the construction of a political order in which electoral competition, civilian governments, and civilian institutions could coexist with the military's continuing hegemony over the strategic direction of the state.¹⁹ A changing global environment — the spread of free-market economics, cellular technology, and an emerging wave of autonomous electronic and social media — was an important contributory factor encouraging this shift.²⁰

This marked an important departure from previous military regimes. General Ayub Khan had attempted to replace parliamentary democracy with a system of Basic Democracies, while General Zia-ul-Haq legitimized military authority through Islamization, coercion, and a shrewdly managed restoration of electoral politics. Musharraf, by contrast, accepted that constitutional government, political parties, elections, and representative institutions had acquired sufficient domestic and international legitimacy that they could no longer be permanently displaced. Instead, his strategy sought to embed these institutions within a constitutional framework that preserved the military's hold over national security, foreign policy, and the broader architecture of governance. In 2000, the head of National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB) and principal architect of redesigning the governance model, Lt. Gen. Tanwir Naqvi, stated categorically; "The question is whether the army controls Pakistan or the bureaucracy. The conundrum is that it is not possible to transform the country without the bureaucracy. The army must control both political and administrative power..."

Musharraf's concept of 'Enlightened Moderation,' introduced during this period, reflected more than a foreign-policy slogan; it signified an attempt to reconcile military-hegemonic modernization with measured political liberalization. Economic reforms, privatization, financial-sector restructuring, telecommunications expansion, local government reform, and greater openness to international investment generated a period of relatively robust economic growth. Simultaneously, Pakistan experienced an unprecedented expansion of private electronic media,

¹⁹ Saeed Shafqat and Saeed Iqbal Wahla, "Experimenting with Democratic Governance: The Impact of Local Bodies Governance Ordinance on Pakistan's Bureaucracy," in *Pakistan: 2005*, ed. Charles H. Kennedy and Cynthia Botteron (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 43–74. For an informative analysis and insider view, see Noel Israel Khokhar, "Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: Musharraf Era, 1999–2003" (PhD diss., National Defence University, Islamabad, 2016), 175–218.

²⁰ Saeed Shafqat, "Re-inventing Pakistan: Islam, Security and Democracy — What Is Changing?" in *Islamization and the Pakistani Economy*, ed. Robert M. Hathaway (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2004), 119–40.

increasing urbanization, and the rapid diffusion of mobile communications and information technologies (see Table 5). These developments widened political participation and transformed public discourse in ways that neither the military nor political parties could fully regulate.

One of the most significant institutional innovations of the Musharraf period was the devolution plan introduced through the Local Government Ordinance of 2001. By creating elected district governments and devolving administrative responsibilities to local authorities, the regime attempted to bypass provincial political elites and establish alternative channels of political legitimacy. Although critics regarded these governance innovations as instruments for weakening established political parties and the DMG cadre (District Management Group officers, colloquially the 'DMG-wallahs'), they nevertheless expanded local political participation, introduced new leadership at the grassroots level, and familiarized a new generation of politicians with electoral governance. The experience demonstrated both the possibilities and the limitations of decentralization when implemented without broad political consensus or constitutional protection.²¹

Constitutionally, the regime pursued an equally ambitious restructuring of political authority. The Legal Framework Order (2002), subsequently incorporated through the Seventeenth Constitutional Amendment, restored electoral politics while simultaneously enhancing presidential authority. Parliament resumed its legislative functions, political parties returned to electoral competition, and civilian governments once again assumed office. Paradoxically, these institutions operated within a constitutional arrangement in which the presidency — backed by hegemonic military authority — retained decisive powers over the appointment and dismissal of governments, control over national-security policy, and influence over key constitutional offices. Electoral democracy thus returned, but civilian autonomy remained closely circumscribed.

The general elections of 2002 illustrated this new political configuration and ushered in a new generation of leadership, drawn partly from established political dynasties and partly from newer local leaders produced by the local-bodies system.²² Unlike earlier periods of martial law, the objective was not to exclude political parties altogether but to reorganize the party system in ways that encouraged coalition politics under military hegemony. The propping up of the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) as the principal governing party — popularly labeled the 'King's Party' — together with alliances involving regional and religious parties, produced a coalition government that possessed electoral legitimacy while remaining dependent upon military support (see Table 3 & 4). Political competition continued, but the boundaries within which it operated were increasingly shaped by the strategic preferences of the military establishment.²³

The events following September 11, 2001, further reinforced this evolving order. Pakistan's role in the United States-led campaign against terrorism significantly enhanced the military's strategic

²¹ Saeed Shafqat and Saeed Iqbal Wahla, "Experimenting with Democratic Governance: The Impact of Local Bodies Governance Ordinance on Pakistan's Bureaucracy," in *Pakistan: 2005*, ed. Charles H. Kennedy and Cynthia Botteron (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 43–74.

²² See, Pattan Development Organisation, *Analysis of Local Government Election 2005: A Report Based on a Survey of Voters* (Islamabad: Pattan Development Organisation, 2006); "Local Government Elections 2005: Observation Report," Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) (Islamabad, 2005). Noel Israel Khokhar, cited above, note 19;

²³ Mariam Mufti, Sahar Shafqat, and Niloufer Siddiqui, eds., *Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving between Dictatorship and Democracy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

importance, both domestically and internationally. Security considerations increasingly influenced national policymaking, while external financial assistance strengthened the state's fiscal capacity. Civil-military relations thus became embedded within broader international security frameworks, further expanding the military's influence over foreign policy, intelligence coordination, and internal security governance. National security became increasingly institutionalized as the principal organizing framework of state policy, consolidating the military's hegemony as political order and the state became further intertwined.

At the same time, the very reforms introduced by the Musharraf regime inadvertently generated new pressures for democratic accountability. The expansion of independent media, the growth of civil society organizations, an increasingly assertive legal profession, and rising educational attainment (including the formation of the Higher Education Commission and its emphasis on expanding and improving the university sector) contributed to the emergence of a more politically engaged urban middle class. These developments broadened public expectations regarding constitutionalism, judicial independence, electoral integrity, and civilian accountability (see Table 5). Ironically, many of the modernization initiatives undertaken under military rule strengthened precisely those societal forces that would later challenge military hegemony.

Judicial Crisis and the Lawyers' Movement

The judicial crisis of 2007 marked the decisive turning point. President Musharraf's suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry triggered the Lawyers' Movement, which produced an unprecedented coalition of lawyers, civil society organizations, journalists, political parties, and urban professionals demanding judicial independence and constitutional rule.²⁴ Unlike earlier democratic movements, which focused primarily on restoring elected governments, the Lawyers' Movement centered on the rule of law, constitutional supremacy, and the restoration of the Chief Justice. The judiciary emerged as an increasingly autonomous political institution, capable of challenging executive authority and reshaping the constitutional balance of power.²⁵

The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 further accelerated political transition while underscoring the continuing fragility of Pakistan's democratic institutions. The tragedy transformed the subsequent elections into a referendum on the future direction of constitutionalism and political order. The general elections of February 2008 produced a broad-based civilian coalition committed to restoring parliamentary democracy, rebalancing civil-military relations, and reversing many of the constitutional arrangements established during military rule, including the eventual repeal of the Seventeenth Amendment provision that had empowered the president to dismiss parliament and the elected government.

²⁴ For an extensive analysis of the Lawyers' Movement and its impact on the judiciary, see Sumreen Fatima, "Lawyers Movement and Independence of Judiciary: Perceptions, Reality and Implications" (MPhil thesis, Centre for Public Policy and Governance, Forman Christian College, 2024). Alejandro Urrutia and Teddy Baker, *Dialogue with Security State Actors in Hybrid Regimes: Recommendations for Constructive Engagement* (Barcelona: International Institute for Integrated Transitions [IFIT],

²⁵ M. Zahid, "Judiciary and Democracy in Pakistan: Between Activism and Restraint," *South Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014): 19–30. For insightful research on the role of judiciary and its workings, see Paula R. Newberg, *Judging the State: Courts and Constitutional Politics in Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

In retrospect, therefore, the significance of the Musharraf decade lies less in the continuation of military rule than in the institutional architecture it created to sustain and expand the military-hegemonic political order.²⁶ By restoring elections, encouraging coalition governments, expanding local governance, liberalizing the media, and maintaining constitutional institutions under military predominance, the regime inadvertently laid many of the institutional foundations upon which post-2008 democratic politics would develop. Electoral politics became normalized, coalition governments became increasingly common, judicial activism emerged as a perpetual feature of governance, and constitutional procedures acquired greater persistence. Yet military influence remained deeply embedded within the strategic culture and structure of the state (see Table 5 & 6).

This paradox constitutes one of the central themes of Pakistan's contemporary political development.²⁷ The decade from 1999 to 2008 neither restored liberal democracy nor perpetuated conventional military dictatorship. Instead, it produced a transitional constitutional order in which democratic institutions were gradually institutionalized without a corresponding restoration of civilian supremacy. The post-2008 democratic era inherited both dimensions of this legacy: increasingly robust constitutional politics (the Eighteenth Amendment) alongside enduring military hegemony over national security and strategic governance (the Twenty-Seventh Amendment).

Accordingly, the Musharraf period should be understood not simply as another military interlude but as the formative phase in the evolution of Pakistan's hybrid political order. It represents the bridge between the unstable civilian politics analyzed in the original 1998 paper and the military-hegemonic democracy that has characterized Pakistan's political development since 2008.

Democratic Continuity, Social Transformation, and Institutional Adaptation: 2008–2026

The updated electoral and parliamentary data presented in Tables 1–6 reveal that Pakistan's democratic trajectory since the late 1990s cannot be adequately understood through the binary distinction between civilian democracy and military rule that characterized much of the earlier literature. Instead, the evidence points to a gradual institutional transformation in which electoral politics has become increasingly regularized while the distribution of political authority has become more dispersed across civilian institutions, the judiciary, and the military establishment.

Unlike the period from 1988 to 1999, when elected governments were repeatedly dismissed through presidential powers or military intervention, the post-2008 period demonstrates a significantly greater degree of constitutional continuity. Since the restoration of electoral politics in 2008, Pakistan has experienced successive national elections in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024, each resulting in the transfer of governmental authority through constitutional procedures rather than military coups. Although political crises have remained frequent, governments have

²⁶ Elizabeth Jelin and Eric Hershberg, eds., *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Mufti, Shafqat, and Siddiqui, cited above, note 23.

²⁷ Jaffrelot, cited above, note 1; Sahar Shafqat, "Pakistan in 2018: Dynamics of a Complex Election," *Asian Survey* 59, no. 1 (2019): 112–21; Chaudhry, cited above, note 13.

Table 1. National Elections in Pakistan and Voter Turnout, 1970–2024

Election	Turnout (%)	Major Winning Party	Seats Won*	Government Formation	Prime Minister
1970	63.1	Awami League / PPP	AL 160, PPP 81	Constitutional crisis	—
1977	55	PPP	Majority	PPP government	Z. A. Bhutto
1985 (non-party)	52	Independents	—	Military-backed	Muhammad Khan Junejo
1988	43.6	PPP	93	Coalition	Benazir Bhutto
1990	45.5	IJI	106	Coalition	Nawaz Sharif
1993	40.3	PPP	86	Coalition	Benazir Bhutto
1997	35.4	PML(N)	137	Majority	Nawaz Sharif
2002	41.8	PML(Q)	118	Coalition	Zafarullah Khan Jamali
2008	44.1	PPP	121	Coalition	Yousaf Raza Gilani
2013	55.0	PML(N)	166	Majority	Nawaz Sharif
2018	51.7	PTI	149	Coalition	Imran Khan
2024	48.0	PML(N)-led coalition (backed by PPP)	Coalition	Coalition government	Shehbaz Sharif

*Seats won figures for earlier elections reflect contemporaneous reporting conventions and are not perfectly comparable across years given subsequent delimitation changes.

Table 2. Evolution of the Major Political Parties, 1988–2024

Party	Principal Leader(s)	Electoral Peak	Organizational Structure	Core Constituency	Ideological Orientation
PPP	Benazir Bhutto, Asif Ali Zardari, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari	2008	Dynastic, cadre-based	Rural Sindh	Centre-left, progressive
PML(N)	Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz Sharif	2013	Family-centered, patronage	Punjab urban / business	Centre-right, developmental
PTI	Imran Khan	2018	Leader-centric, movement-party	Urban middle class, youth	Populist
MQM	Altaf Hussain, Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui	1990s	Highly centralized	Urban Sindh	Ethnic representation / authoritarian
JUI-F	Fazlur Rehman	Coalition influence	Religious network	KP / Balochistan	Islamist
ANP	Wali Khan, Asfandiyar Wali	Provincial	Ethnic	Pashtun belt	Secular nationalist
BAP	Collective / shifting leadership	2018	Provincial elite	Balochistan	Provincial interests

Table 3. Parliamentary Continuity and Constitutional Transfers of Power, 1988–2024

Parliament Years	Completed Term	Transfer of Power	Constitutional Milestones
1988–1990	No — presidential dismissal	Article 58(2)(b)	—
1990–1993	No — presidential dismissal	Political crisis	—
1993–1996	No — presidential dismissal	Continued instability	—
1997–1999	No — military intervention (1999)	Constitutional confrontation	—
2002–2007	Yes — elections	Musharraf transition	—
2008–2013	Yes — democratic transfer	Peaceful transfer	18th Amendment
2013–2018	Yes — democratic transfer	First elected government to complete a full term	—
2018–2022	No — vote of no confidence	Constitutional transfer	—
2022–2024	Caretaker transition	Leading to 2024 elections	Democratic continuity
2024–present	Ongoing	—	Coalition government; 27th Amendment

Table 4. Civilian Governments under the Military-Hegemonic Political Order, 2008–2026

Government	Years	Governing Coalition	Military Relations	Major Institutional Developments
PPP	2008–2013	PPP-led	Cooperative–competitive	18th Amendment, NFC Award
PML(N)	2013–2017	Majority	Increasing tensions	CPEC, Panama crisis
PML(N)	2017–2018	Nawaz Sharif replaced by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi	Managed transition	Electoral reforms
PTI	2018–2022	Coalition	Initially aligned, later adversarial	National Security Policy, COVID-19 governance
PDM coalition	2022–2024	Coalition	Accommodation	Vote of no confidence, economic stabilization
PML(N)-led coalition & PPP as major partner	2024–continuing	Coalition	Institutional accommodation	IMF-led economic reforms; constitutional and judicial debates; evolving civil-military coordination

Table 5. Social Transformation and Political Change in Pakistan, 1998–2025

Indicator	1998	2025
Urban population	32.5% of total population	39.3% of total population (2023 Census, latest available)
Literacy rate	44%	63% (population aged 10+)
Universities (HEIs)	110 recognized universities / degree-awarding institutions	275 universities / degree-awarding institutions
Internet users	Less than 1% of population (nascent)	57% of population
Mobile phones	1 million cellular subscribers	Nearly universal access (over 190 million subscribers; teledensity above 80%)
Women in parliament	60 reserved seats in the National Assembly; very few directly elected	60 reserved seats plus 13 women elected on general seats (2024 National Assembly)
Youth population (15–29)	Approximately 28% of population	Approximately 30% of population, with substantially higher electoral participation after 2018 and 2024

Sources: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *1998 Population Census and 7th Population and Housing Census (2023)*; Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM/HIES 2024–25); Higher Education Commission of Pakistan; Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, *Performance Monitoring Report 2024–25*; Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, *Annual Reports*; Election Commission of Pakistan, *General Elections 2024*; National Assembly of Pakistan, membership records; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects*.

Table 6. Pakistan’s Political System across Three Phases

Phase	Regime Type	Main Characteristics
1971–1999	Democracy interrupted	Coups, dismissals, constitutional instability
1999–2008	Military-led hybrid democracy	Elections under military predominance; emergence of an urban middle class and a young generation of voters
2008–2026	Military-hegemonic electoral democracy	Regular elections, party led governments, contested outcomes, political polarization and continuing military hegemony

increasingly been replaced through elections, parliamentary votes of no confidence, judicial intervention, or coalition realignment rather than extra-constitutional seizures of power — an important qualitative change in Pakistan’s political development.

Table 1 shows that electoral participation has also expanded over time despite fluctuating turnout rates. The elections of 2013 and 2018 recorded the highest levels of voter participation since

the restoration of democracy, reflecting the increasing legitimacy of elections as the principal mechanism for political competition. Even the highly contested 2024 elections reaffirmed that political actors continue to seek legitimacy primarily through electoral mobilization rather than revolutionary or extra-constitutional alternatives. They also reveal the growing weight of the middle class and of younger voters in the electoral process. Elections have therefore become institutionalized despite persistent disputes over electoral administration, alleged 'establishment interference,' and unfair political outcomes.

Equally significant has been the transformation of Pakistan's party system. As Table 2 illustrates, the transition from a predominantly two-party competition between the PPP and PML(N) has evolved into a competitive three-party system following the emergence of PTI. While dynastic leadership continues to characterize both the PPP and PML(N), PTI introduced a different organizational model centered on charismatic leadership, urban middle-class mobilization, and digital political communication. Consequently, electoral competition has become considerably more aggressive and socially diversified than during the 1990s, although internal party democracy remains weak across virtually all major political parties — with the partial exception of cadre-based parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which retains comparatively regular and institutionalized internal elections.

At the parliamentary level, the data indicate an equally important institutional shift. During the democratic decade of the 1990s, no elected National Assembly completed its constitutional tenure; governments were repeatedly dismissed before completing their mandates, reinforcing political uncertainty and institutional fragility. In contrast, since 2008 Pakistan has experienced an unprecedented degree of parliamentary continuity. The National Assemblies elected in 2008 and 2013 completed their constitutional terms, although in 2017 Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was removed through judicial intervention and replaced by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, with parliament nonetheless completing its term. The political transition following the vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022 similarly demonstrated that constitutional mechanisms have increasingly displaced military intervention as the principal means of political change (see Table 3). Although political instability persists, constitutional procedures have acquired greater legitimacy among political elites.²⁸

The constitutional reforms introduced through the Eighteenth Amendment further accelerated this institutional transition. By substantially reducing presidential powers, restoring parliamentary supremacy, strengthening provincial autonomy, and institutionalizing the National Finance Commission framework, the amendment fundamentally altered the balance of authority within Pakistan's federal system. These reforms reduced the likelihood of the presidential dismissals that had characterized the 1990s while simultaneously increasing the importance of coalition building, parliamentary negotiation, and intergovernmental coordination.²⁹

Yet these democratic gains have not resulted in the consolidation of autonomous civilian

²⁸ Mohammad Waseem, *Democratization in Pakistan: A Study of the 2008 General Elections* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sahar Shafqat, "Democracy and Political Parties in Pakistan," *Pakistan Horizon* 65, no. 2 (2012): 41–56; Ashok K. Behuria and Ashish Shukla, "Making Sense of Elections in Pakistan: Challenges Galore," *Strategic Analysis* 48, no. 2 (2024): 131–44.

²⁹ Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Eighteenth Amendment Act, 2010.

governance. Rather, Table 4 shows that each civilian government since 2008 has operated within an evolving framework of military hegemony. The PPP government institutionalized constitutional reforms while accommodating military preferences on national security. The PML(N) government sought greater civilian autonomy but increasingly encountered tensions over foreign policy, internal security, and accountability institutions — tensions that eventually led to the removal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, although the PML(N) government itself completed its five-year term. The PTI government initially enjoyed close alignment with the military establishment before experiencing a rapid deterioration in civil-military relations after 2021. The coalition governments formed after 2022 have similarly operated within an environment in which civilian political authority carries constitutional legitimacy but remains constrained by the military-hegemonic order.

Key Transformations

These patterns suggest that Pakistan's political order is no longer adequately described as alternating between civilian and military rule. Instead, civilian and parliamentary institutions function within a broader structure in which multiple centers of authority simultaneously influence governance. Parliament legislates, political parties compete electorally, the judiciary exercises constitutional review, provincial governments enjoy greater autonomy than in previous decades, and the military continues to deepen — and, at times, overextend — its influence over national security, strategic decision-making, and crisis management (see Table 6). The resulting system is best understood as a military-hegemonic political order rather than either a hybrid or an authoritarian one.

A second notable transformation concerns coalition politics. Single-party dominance has steadily given way to coalition governments requiring extensive inter-party bargaining. Coalition governance has become the common rather than the exceptional form of government formation, reflecting both electoral fragmentation and Pakistan's increasingly diverse political landscape. While coalition politics has often reduced governmental stability, it has simultaneously encouraged negotiation, accommodation, and constitutional bargaining among competing political actors.

A third, related transformation — not fully explored in this paper, but worth noting as a by-product of coalition politics — is the retreat of the national parties toward their ethnic strongholds: the PPP toward Sindh, the PML-N toward Punjab, and PTI toward Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with much of Balochistan's indigenous leadership increasingly absorbed into the PPP, PML-N, JUI-F, or JI.

Fourth, judicial activism has emerged as a defining feature of the contemporary democratic order. Unlike earlier eras, in which the judiciary generally validated executive interventions, the

post-Lawyers'-Movement judiciary has become an increasingly autonomous political institution. Judicial review now influences executive appointments, electoral administration, constitutional interpretation, and, occasionally, civil-military disagreements. Although debates continue regarding judicial overreach, the judiciary has become an indispensable participant in Pakistan's evolving constitutional framework.

Taken together, the evidence presented in Tables 1–6 points toward a broader reinterpretation of Pakistan's democratic experience. The central question is no longer whether democracy has survived repeated interruptions but how democratic institutions have adapted to military hegemony, despite occasional confrontation and tenuous relations. Pakistan's contemporary political system exhibits sustained electoral competition, increasing parliamentary continuity, sporadically effective governance, and regular transfers of power, yet *these democratic processes operate within a political order where military influence remains structurally embedded rather than episodically interventionist*.

Accordingly, the principal analytical conclusion of this revised study differs from that of the original 1998 paper. Pakistan's democratic evolution should be understood not as a linear transition toward liberal democratic consolidation, nor as a recurring cycle of democratic breakdown, but as the gradual institutionalization of electoral democracy within a military-hegemonic political order in which democratic legitimacy, constitutional governance, coalition politics, judicial activism, and strategic military influence have become embedded features of the Pakistani state. This institutional arrangement, while imperfect and frequently contested, represents the defining characteristic of Pakistan's democratic development in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.³⁰ The ongoing electoral contests in Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan — marked by electoral violence, allegations of unfair practices, maladministration, police overreach, and interference by the 'establishment' — not only undermine citizens' faith in electoral politics but also risk making a mockery of electoral democracy under the military-hegemonic order. The rise of grievance politics and of complaints over unfair electoral practices is emerging as a serious challenge to that order.³¹

*This leads me to argue that there is a window of opportunity for democratic rejuvenation and consolidation, if Pakistan's political leadership, together with its people, can build consensus around a narrative resting on three points. First, culturally, democracy is accepted as a value by a substantial majority of Pakistanis, who see it as producing a government that people trust and that is responsive to citizens. Second, constitutionally, the major actors; political leaders, parties, and parliament and the organs of the state — military, bureaucracy, and judiciary — accept and reflect democratic norms. Third, behaviorally, no group or actor, ethnic or religious, threatens to overthrow the government or to break away from the state; in other words, extremism and separatism are declared illegal and intolerable. If Pakistan's leadership and decision-makers strive to achieve these goals, the country can make the transition from military-hegemonic electoral democracy to democratic rejuvenation.*³²

³⁰ Shafqat, cited above, note 2; Shah, cited above, note 11; Chaudhry, cited above, note 13; Levitsky and Way, cited above, note 14; Jalal, cited above, note 12; Jaffrelot, cited above, note 1.

³¹ "Gilgit-Baltistan: Human Rights and Political Realities," Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) (Lahore: HRCP, 2021).

³² Building on, and adapting, Alfred Stepan, "The New Professionalism of Internal Warfare and Military Role Expansion," in *Authoritarian Brazil: Origins, Policies, and Future*, ed. Alfred Stepan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 47–65; and Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics*, cited above, note 14.

Pakistan's Democratic Trajectory: An Assessment and Projection

Pakistan's democratic trajectory over the past quarter century invites a reassessment of many of the assumptions that have shaped both academic scholarship and policy discourse. The foregoing analysis of the period from 1999 to 2026 demonstrates that democratic development has been shaped by an intricate interaction among competing political parties, the military establishment, a politicized and less confident bureaucracy, an expanding judiciary, an increasingly vocal electronic and social media and civil society, technological transformation, and changing geopolitical realities.³³

This study illustrates that Pakistan has neither experienced a linear democratic transition nor remained trapped in perpetual authoritarianism. Rather, it has evolved into a military-hegemonic political order in which democratic institutions have adapted to operate within a framework whose broad parameters are substantially defined by the military, but within which multiple stakeholders compete and negotiate to secure their interests and position. Elections have become increasingly regular, constitutional transfers of power more common, judicial oversight more assertive, and parliamentary processes more routinized. Simultaneously, the military has continued to exercise considerable authority over national security, foreign policy, strategic economic initiatives, and crisis management. The defining characteristic of Pakistan's political system, therefore, has not been institutional instability alone but the continuous renegotiation of authority among competing power elites, interest groups, and institutions, as detailed above.

The constitutional developments following the Eighteenth Amendment represent one of the most significant transformations in Pakistan's political history. By substantially devolving legislative, administrative, and fiscal authority to the provinces, the amendment redefined federalism and strengthened parliamentary government. Provincial governments acquired greater policy autonomy, yet they have not, in turn, devolved power to local government, and local political actors remain marginal to service delivery and development planning. It merits attention that decentralization also exposed uneven policymaking and administrative capacity across provinces, highlighting that constitutional reform, although necessary, cannot by itself ensure effective governance. *Institutional performance ultimately depends on bureaucratic competence, fiscal sustainability, political accountability, and citizens' trust in those who govern.*

Pakistani society itself has undergone enormous transformation; in orientation, attitudes, social behavior, value structures, and interpersonal relations. The Pakistan of 2025 differs fundamentally from that of 1999. Rapid urbanization, demographic expansion, higher literacy (despite the persistence of an estimated 2.5 million out-of-school children), unprecedented growth in higher education, widespread digital connectivity, and the emergence of a politically conscious youth population have altered both the expectations of citizens and the operating environment of political institutions. The expansion of mobile communications, social media, and digital journalism has weakened traditional monopolies over information and significantly increased

³³ See, for an incisive study on challenges of development and socio-economic transformations, Jamil Nasir, *Development Challenges in Pakistan: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). On adaptive skills of bureaucracy and governance tactics, see, Adnan Rasool, *Sabotage: Lessons in Bureaucratic Governance from Pakistan, Taiwan, and Turkey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023).

public scrutiny of political actors (see Table 5). Electoral campaigns, political mobilization, and policy debates increasingly unfold in digital spaces where narratives are contested in real time. Political legitimacy is therefore no longer derived solely from electoral victory or constitutional authority but also from the capacity of governments to communicate effectively, deliver public services, and respond rapidly to public demands.³⁴

This transformation illustrates an important theoretical proposition: democratic rejuvenation depends not only upon constitutional engineering but also upon broader processes of social modernization. Expanding education, urbanization, digital communication, and economic diversification create new forms of political participation and new demands for accountability. In Pakistan, these social transformations have progressed more rapidly than institutional reform, generating persistent tensions between an increasingly mobilized society and state institutions that continue to operate through aging administrative structures. Many contemporary political crises therefore reflect institutional adaptation to social change rather than simple political or constitutional conflict.

The evolution of Pakistan's political system also reflects changing conceptions of state capacity. Earlier debates frequently equated democratic progress with electoral competition or civilian supremacy. Contemporary governance challenges, however, increasingly revolve around the state's ability to formulate policy, coordinate institutions, regulate complex markets, manage technological change, ensure cybersecurity, respond to climate-related disasters, and maintain economic resilience. Democratic legitimacy is becoming progressively linked to governmental effectiveness rather than to procedural democracy alone. *Citizens increasingly evaluate governments through their capacity to deliver economic opportunity, social protection, infrastructure, education, health services, and public security.*³⁵ It bears reiterating that *while elites and institutions contribute to constructing democracy, it is ultimately sustained by the trust and support of citizens.*

The experience of the last two decades also underscores the increasing importance of judicialization in politics. Constitutional litigation, judicial review, and the expanding role of the superior courts have transformed the judiciary into a major political actor. While judicial intervention has often strengthened constitutionalism and electoral accountability, it has also occasionally blurred the boundary between legal adjudication and political decision-making. Democratic consolidation therefore requires a more carefully balanced relationship among the executive, legislature, judiciary, and other constitutional institutions.³⁶

The growing interaction between domestic governance and international political economy further reinforces this transformation. Pakistan's strategic partnership with China, participation in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, evolving relations with the United States, the renewed importance of the Gulf states, and intensifying geopolitical competition across Asia have expanded the strategic responsibilities of the Pakistani state. Economic diplomacy, technological cooperation,

³⁴ Saeed Shafqat, "Praetorians and People," cited above, note 15; Malik and Tudor, cited above, note 1; Adnan Rasool, note 33.

³⁵ See Ahsan Rana, cited above, note 13; Saeed Shafqat, *Pathways to Governance and Civil Service Reform in Pakistan: Federal, Provincial and Local*, Policy Brief (Centre for Public Policy and Governance, Forman Christian College, 2020). For a rigorous comparative study, see Rasool, cited above, note 33; and Jamil Nasir, cited above, note 34.

³⁶ See Sumreen Fatima, cited above, note 25.

digital infrastructure, energy security, and regional connectivity have become integral components of governance, requiring state institutions to address policy domains that extend far beyond traditional questions of electoral politics.³⁷ *Winning the trust of the people lies in improving the capacity of governing institutions; the growing perception among ordinary citizens that the state behaves as a predator, and their declining faith in government institutions, is a worrisome trend.*

This broader perspective also invites a reconsideration of civil-military relations. Rather than viewing the military exclusively as an obstacle to democratization, contemporary analysis should distinguish between military-hegemonic order and institutional coordination; the latter a political and bureaucratic function that continues to suffer from a lack of political will and from bureaucratic inertia in implementation. Pakistan's experience demonstrates that periods of confrontation between civilian governments and the military have frequently generated political instability, whereas periods of negotiated institutional accommodation have generally provided greater political stability and policy continuity. Such arrangements, however, also raise continuing questions about democratic accountability, civilian oversight, and constitutional balance. The central challenge for Pakistan is therefore twofold; reducing military influence and simultaneously strengthening civilian institutional competence, policy capacity, and public legitimacy. Innovative adaptation in these areas can give real impetus to improved governance.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important conclusion emerging from this study is that Pakistan's democratic future will depend less upon constitutional redesign than upon improvements in governance. Institutional effectiveness, bureaucratic professionalism, fiscal reform, local-government capacity, evidence-based policymaking, technological adaptation, and inclusive economic growth are likely to determine democratic resilience more decisively than formal constitutional amendments. Democracy can no longer be understood merely as a mechanism for selecting governments; it must increasingly be evaluated by the state's capacity to govern effectively under conditions of rapid social and technological transformation.

From a comparative perspective, Pakistan increasingly resembles a number of developing democracies in which democratic institutions coexist with powerful unelected actors, expanding digital societies, and growing demands for effective governance. In this sense, Pakistan is not an exceptional case; it reflects broader global trends in which democratic systems are adapting to new technological, economic, and geopolitical realities. The country's experience therefore contributes to wider debates concerning hybrid political orders, state capacity, democratic resilience, and governance in the twenty-first century.

Pakistan's democratic evolution should be understood as a process of institutional adaptation rather than democratic failure. The political system has undoubtedly experienced repeated crises, constitutional tensions, and uneven democratic development. Nevertheless, it has also demonstrated considerable resilience: elections have become institutionalized, constitutional continuity has strengthened, provincial autonomy has expanded, judicial oversight has deepened,

³⁷ Saeed Shafqat and Ayesha Siddique, "Pakistan's Changing Security Paradigm: National Security, Governance and Counter-Terrorism," SIPEG Policy Brief no. 11 (August 2026).

and society has become more informed, urbanized, and digitally connected than at any previous point in its history.

The next phase of Pakistan's democratic development will therefore depend on whether its political and institutional leadership can successfully integrate these transformed social realities into equally transformed institutions of governance. Pakistan's future democratic consolidation will depend upon two mutually reinforcing transformations. Political parties must evolve from personalized electoral vehicles into internally democratic, policy-oriented, and institutionally accountable organizations (at present, none of Pakistan's major parties fully meet these criteria; see Table 4). Simultaneously, the constitutional relationship between civilian governments and the military must evolve toward a stable rejuvenation in which strategic coherence, constitutional supremacy, and democratic accountability reinforce, rather than undermine, one another. In analytical terms, this implies an evolutionary transition from military hegemony toward a relationship in which the military becomes an equal institutional partner within a constitutionally defined order. In its own enlightened institutional interest, the military will need to reassess the costs of sustained power accumulation and create more space for parliament, civilian administration, policing, social justice, and citizen-welfare institutions. By relinquishing disproportionate institutional weight, the military can create opportunities for other state institutions to strengthen, thereby contributing to, rather than frustrating, democratic deepening. The proposition is admittedly difficult to realize, but it is precisely because it is difficult that it deserves to be articulated as a long-term institutional objective.³⁸

At this critical juncture, military hegemony has become overstretched; it has reached something of a plateau, and it will either collapse under its own weight or adapt and refurbish itself by embracing contemporary domestic, regional, and global realities. The military needs to explore a path of self-correction before overstretch triggers collapse of the state and societal anarchy. Security of Pakistan as a state hinges on the military, any disarray in its top command structure could unravel the State. I, therefore propose moving beyond the traditional transition paradigm toward a broader framework of democratic governance — one that entails not simply conducting periodic elections or constitutional transfers of power, but raising the capacity of state institutions to govern effectively, maintain legitimacy, adapt to change, and respond to citizens' evolving expectations. Contemporary states derive legitimacy not only from elections but from their ability to deliver security, justice, economic opportunity, infrastructure, education, health care, environmental protection, and administrative efficiency. Pakistan's principal governance challenge is therefore institutional performance rather than constitutional design alone. Strengthening the civil service, enhancing fiscal management, improving regulatory institutions, and building evidence-based policymaking are becoming central requirements for democratic resilience. Strengthening the civil service also means building the capacity of provincial and local-government cadres, not the federal service alone.³⁹ The future of democracy will increasingly depend on whether citizens perceive the state as capable, responsive, effective, and prioritizing citizen-welfare.

³⁸ On democratic resilience and the relationship between political institutions and governance, in addition to the 1998 article, see its subsequent elaboration in Saeed Shafqat, "Pakistan: Military Sustaining Hegemony and Constructing Democracy?" *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 20–51; and Jamil Nasir, cited above, note 34.

³⁹ See Shafqat, *Pathways to Governance and Civil Service Reform in Pakistan*, cited above, note 35; and Saeed Shafqat and Reem Hasan, "Improving Governance: Reforming the Provincial Civil Service in Punjab" (Centre for Public Policy and Governance, Forman Christian College, 2016), arguing for greater investment in the training and capacity of street-level bureaucrats.

Pakistan's political and institutional leadership and decision-makers have an opportunity here: to construct an effective, adaptive, and developmental democratic state capable of responding to the opportunities and uncertainties of an increasingly multiplex and technologically driven world. The signs of such a transformation remain mixed, however, if the political and institutional leadership acts in harmony and adopts a corrective path, the prospects of an alternate to military-hegemonic electoral political order to democratic rejuvenation could brighten up.

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info@sipeg.org

sipegshafqat@gmail.com

+ 92 322 4474413

+ 92 321 5154947

DHA, Lahore.