

Elections 2024, hybrid regimes and the future of democracy in Pakistan

Unfair practices and irregularities have tarnished the history of elections in Pakistan due to the continued influence of the military establishment.

In the past 75 years, military dictators have ruled Pakistan for 33 years: Ayub Khan/Yahya Khan from 1958 to 1971, Zia-ul-Haq from 1977 to 1988, and General Musharraf from 1999 to 2008. In the remaining 42 years, Pakistan has had 24 Prime Ministers; but if we include the eight caretaker Prime Ministers the number goes up to 32. Since the 1990s, Pakistan has established a system of caretaker governments to hold new elections and ostensibly overcome election engineering, but the caretaker governments have always been controlled by the military. No Prime Minister has ever completed a five-year term in Pakistan—they have all been removed from power due to military pressure and political manoeuvring. This reflects the tension between the civilian and military establishment due to the military's dominance in controlling political and economic resources in Pakistan. It is argued that this tension has historically been connected to the structural realities of state formation from the very beginning after Pakistan gained independence.

Recent elections

During the 2024 elections, the usual manoeuvring tactics continued. The Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), the party of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, had received military support before the election, which gave it an advantage over then-Prime Minister and former famous cricketer Imran Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Khan was sentenced to decades in prison a week before the election on various charges.

Approximately five weeks before the election on February 8, the Election Commission of Pakistan decided that because Khan's PTI party had failed to conduct intra-party elections, a mandatory requirement, the party was ineligible to use its cricket bat symbol (Khan was an elite cricketer) during the elections. All the party's candidates had to run as independents with different election symbols. In Pakistan, where most of the population lacks formal education, election symbols are essential. Over the preceding year, the PTI faced a state crackdown, leading to thousands of its

members being jailed and almost all its senior leadership being pressured to quit politics. The party faced a media blackout and campaign restrictions during the election's run-up.

Consequently, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party received a sympathy vote, particularly from the youth, who comprise 64 percent of the population. This resulted in PTI-backed independent candidates winning 93 out of 103 seats. The PML-N party won 75 seats, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 54, and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) won 17 seats in the national assembly. As a result, a weak coalition government comprising PML-N, PPP, and MQM has been formed. The military establishment determines the economic and political priorities of the coalition.

In the lead-up to the 2018 elections, the military establishment also played a crucial role in bringing Imran Khan to power. The ousting of then Prime Minister Sharif on corruption charges and the jailing of the entire senior leadership of his party raised serious questions about the fairness of the electoral process.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, these elections, at the time, were the 'dirtiest and most micromanaged' in the country's history. Reports of pre-poll manipulation and political engineering were rampant, favouring PTI and denying the other political parties a level playing field. On the day of voting, there were significant issues with vote counting, which led to inexplicable delays in declaring results, especially in the mega city of Karachi. These problems fuelled the perception that the elections had been rigged. Finally, after the polls, independent and more minor parties were allegedly corralled towards PTI, strengthening the perception that the entire system was working to ensure a PTI government, both at the federal and provincial levels.

In 2017, the conflict between the military and the civilian government was between Nawaz Sharif and the military, and lately, it has been between Imran Khan and the military. On May 9, 2023, after Khan's arrest, there was unprecedented violence. PTI activists burnt and vandalised dozens of military and state buildings, including the Army headquarters in Rawalpindi, the Inter-Services Intelligence building in Faisalabad, and the residence of the Core Commander Lahore.

The government believed that since most attacks targeted military installations, the aim was to disturb the unity of command within the military and remove the Army Chief General Asim Munir, who was considered anti-Khan by the PTI. The attacks

were perceived as planned, and it was alleged that some military officials supported the PTI's activities on May 9 as part of a power struggle within the military establishment. As a result, thousands of PTI workers were arrested, and the Pakistan Army took action against 18 officers for mishandling the protests of Khan's supporters, and sacked three senior officers including a Lieutenant General. This action by the military sent a clear message that supporting Khan would not be tolerated in their ranks.

A defining moment came in October 2020 when Nawaz Sharif, the disqualified prime minister, called out the military by name—accusing the then Army chief of staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and the former head of Pakistan's powerful intelligence service, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, of engineering Khan's rise to power. Later, after Khan was ousted through a non-confidence motion in the National Assembly supported by General Bajwa, he launched a massive campaign through rallies and especially on social media, accusing General Bajwa of orchestrating the no-confidence motion against his government.

Hybrid regimes in Pakistan

Hybrid regimes in Pakistan refer to periods in history where elements of democracy and authoritarianism coexist. Flawed elections limited political freedoms, and the dominance of military influence in politics often characterised these periods. Alternating phases of civilian rule and military interventions have marked these periods. The government formed after the 2024 election is often called a 'hybrid plus' regime, as the military establishment might control it even more strictly.

Pakistan's hybrid regimes originated in the state formation in the early years of its independence—established as a distinct nation-state for the Muslims of India. The demand for the nation of Pakistan mainly originated from the northern and central regions of the Indian subcontinent, where the Hindu majority was dominant.

The Muslim League movement for Pakistan was led mainly by middle-class government servants, traders, and professionals who migrated to Pakistan in 1947. However, the party did not have roots in Muslim-majority areas that later became Pakistan, so it could not establish a modern democratic state where the local landowning class would dominate. Instead, it had to rely on non-democratic colonial administrative structures based on vice-regal colonial practices.

The challenging situation required forming alliances with the military. State

formation was primarily driven by the concept of war-making, leading to a sustained political economy of defence. This defined the state's political and economic priorities and paved the way for the military's continued role in defending Pakistan's borders and ideology.

Consequently, and as mentioned earlier, Pakistan faced 33 years of military dictatorship. Since General Musharraf's resignation in 2008, there has been a trend of hybrid civilian regimes alternating with military interventions in Pakistan. The civilian governments have faced challenges from the influential military establishment, which continues to hold significant power over politics, economy, and foreign policy.

The most egregious example of a hybrid regime was the military patronage of Imran Khan and the orchestration of the 2018 elections to bring him to power. Khan came with a slogan of ostensibly fighting corruption. In pursuit of this goal, he initiated flawed corruption cases against opposition leaders to discredit and eliminate them from the political scene. For this purpose, he used the military as his personal policing institution. He appointed many military officials to civilian posts, which caused resentment among qualified civilian officers. As a result, Khan ceded alarming amounts of political space to the military establishment. The top generals had a say in every element of the administration, from foreign policy and security matters to economic decisions. Khan's dependence on the military establishment was so complete that in a television interview, the Speaker of the Punjab Assembly, Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, one of Khan's allies, mockingly said, 'They (the military) kept changing Khan's nappies all the time instead of providing him opportunities to learn politics and the art of governance'.

Khan's incompetent governance and mismanagement of the economy led to the military's unpopularity. Former Army Chief Qamar Javad Bajwa claimed to play a neutral political role. He allowed opposition parties, which had come together under the umbrella of the Pakistan Democratic Movement, to lodge a no-confidence motion against Khan's government in the National Assembly. Bajwa openly admitted that 'decades of unconstitutional' interference in national politics by his powerful institution had periodically exposed it to public criticism.'

In April 2022, the coalition government led by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) took over from Khan's military-dominated administration, promising to restore complete democracy. During their tenure, the PDM government passed several laws and amendments that were criticised for being anti-democratic. The

Army Amendment Bill granted military courts jurisdiction to prosecute civilians and allowed the military establishment to engage in national development without civilian approval. The Official Secrets Amendment gave intelligence agencies extensive powers and allowed civilian detention without proper legal procedures. The Criminal Law Amendment Bill introduced imprisonment for criticising the Armed Forces. The 2023 Election (Amendment) Bill granted the electoral oversight body more power and extended policy decision-making authority to the interim caretaker government. Additionally, the PEMRA Bill curtailed freedom of speech by prohibiting government criticism.

The PDM government also established a Special Investment Facilitation Council, which gave significant authority to the military to steer the country's declining economy, giving them the power to advance their economic and strategic objectives.

The PDM government completed Khan's remaining term, after he was ousted due to a no-confidence motion. Its tenure was from April 10, 2022, to August 10, 2023. Later, the caretaker government took over government control. It amended the National Database and Registration Authority Rules, 2020, allowing serving military personnel to be appointed as the Authority's chairman. This amendment has given the army control over the National Database and Registration Authority, increasing its capacity to surveil citizens.

The military's interference in Pakistan's politics and economy since 2018 is alarming. Despite claims of neutrality, it appears to be increasingly involved, hindering progress towards democracy. Scholar Ayesha Jalal termed the election of 2024 as the victory of Pakistan's military establishment, arguing that the Army High Command has been exerting control over the defence and foreign affairs for several decades and has expanded its influence on the economy and agriculture.

The military gained extraordinary power in 2023, and the weak coalition government led by Shahbaz Sharif is expected to be subordinate to the military. The government is facing significant challenges, particularly in the economic sector.

Many citizens, especially the youth who support Khan, are unhappy with the declining economy. The annual GDP growth rate in 2023 was zero percent; the annual population growth rate in 2024 was 1.96 percent; as of 2023, poverty was expected to reach 37.2 percent; and national debt is expected to be 71.8 percent re GDP in 2024. This has led to economic and political instability.

To conclude, the military has used the structural realities of state formation in Pakistan to legitimise its political and economic dominance while positioning itself as a guarantor of stability. However, their actions have led to the most severe political crisis since 2018. The 2024 elections have intensified political tensions. As a result, the coalition government formed appears to be unstable, and the future of democracy seems bleak.

Main image: Original work by Sabir Nazar.