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Abstract: *This study investigates the multifaceted challenges to democratic consolidation in Pakistan during the critical period of 2008 to 2015 a time marked by the country's transition from prolonged military rule to an elected civilian government. Although the formal restoration of democracy in 2008 signaled hope for political stability, a range of entrenched structural and institutional barriers continued to undermine democratic progress. This paper critically analyzes key political, social, and economic factors that impeded the strengthening of democratic institutions, including persistent political instability, weak governance, systemic corruption, terrorism, and on-going regional tensions. It also evaluates the roles played by political parties, civil society, and the judiciary in shaping the democratic trajectory during this transitional era. By assessing both the gains and setbacks of this period, the study provides a balanced perspective on Pakistan's democratic evolution. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of democratization in post-authoritarian contexts and offer valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and democracy advocates.*

Introduction

Democratic consolidation refers to the process through which democracy becomes deeply rooted, and legitimate in a political system. It entails the stabilization and institutionalization of democratic norms, values, and procedures in such a way that the threat of authoritarian regression is significantly minimized. According to Schedler (1998), democratic consolidation involves securing new democracies by reinforcing democratic routes and constructing safeguards against potential authoritarian reversals. He emphasizes the necessity of embedding democratic principles and values to ensure long-term stability and prevent backsliding. Larry Diamond (1996) similarly defines democratic consolidation as the attainment of broad and deep legitimacy, wherein all significant political actors both at the elite and mass levels believe that democracy is the most suitable form of governance for their society, compared to any conceivable alternative. For Diamond, the core of democratic consolidation lies in the internalization of democratic values by political actors, reinforcing the system's legitimacy. Ademola (2011) frames democratic consolidation as a transitional phase from authoritarianism to a stable

democratic order. He argues that this process is essential for establishing effective and lasting democratic institutions capable of ensuring political stability and good governance. Linz and Stepan (1996) conceptualize a consolidated democracy as one in which democratic governance is "the only game in town" behaviourally, attitudinally, and constitutionally. Behaviourally, no major political actors seek to achieve their goals through non-democratic means. Attitudinally, the public overwhelmingly supports democratic values. Constitutionally, both governmental and non-governmental actors operate within the established democratic legal framework. Their model highlights that democracy is consolidated when all competing actors and institutions accept and operate within democratic rules and procedures. Munck (1994) stresses the importance of consensus among political actors and society in general. He asserts that democratic consolidation occurs when all major actors adhere to democratic rules and refrain from using external resources or undemocratic strategies to achieve political goals.

This research critically examines the key challenges to democratic consolidation in Pakistan between 2008 and 2015, a period marked by significant political transition. The 2008 general elections, initially scheduled for January but postponed following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, were eventually held on February 18, 2008. Major political parties, including the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), participated in the elections, while others such as Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) chose to boycott the polls (Waseem, 2014). These elections provided the public with a critical opportunity to re-engage in democratic processes after years of military rule and political instability. Following the elections, the PPP, led by Asif Ali Zardari, formed a coalition government, bolstered by the Bhurban Agreement with the PML-N, this aimed at restoring the judiciary and fostering democratic cooperation (Shafqat, 2012). Yousaf Raza Gilani was sworn in as Prime Minister on March 24, 2008, followed by the formation of a new cabinet. His administration faced three major challenges: restoring the judiciary, managing a deepening economic crisis, and confronting the escalating threat of terrorism (Fair, 2014). Provincial governments were established through various coalitions, including PML-N in Punjab, Awami National Party (ANP) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, PPP and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) in Sindh, and a multiparty alliance in Baluchistan. During its tenure from 2008 to 2013, the PPP government achieved notable constitutional reforms, particularly by enhancing provincial autonomy through the implementation of the 18th Amendment to the 1973 Constitution (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2010). However, it struggled with socio-economic instability and governance inefficiencies that impeded democratic deepening (Khan, 2013). The peaceful completion of the PPP's five-year term culminated in general elections held on May 11, 2013, marking Pakistan's first democratic transfer of power between civilian governments (Waseem, 2014). The PML-N emerged as the majority party, with Nawaz Sharif becoming Prime Minister in 2013 election. His government prioritized economic recovery and infrastructure development but was plagued by transparency and accountability issues, which ultimately led to his disqualification following the Panama Papers scandal (Shah, 2014). By analyzing the democratic trajectories of both the PPP and PML-N governments, this study assesses the enduring obstacles to democratic consolidation in Pakistan during this crucial period.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology. It focuses on understanding the deeper political, institutional, and societal factors that hindered democratic development in Pakistan from 2008 to 2015. By analyzing narratives, events, and discourse through qualitative interpretation, the study seeks to explain how and why key souring factors obstructed democratic consolidation during this period. The study is based exclusively on secondary data, collected from a wide range of credible and relevant

sources. These include academic journals and books related to political science, governance, civil-military relations, and democratization in Pakistan. Reports and publications from International Crisis Group, human rights organizations, and Freedom House, Newspaper articles, editorials, and political commentaries from reputable national and international media have also been studied. The following research questions will be addressed.

Research Questions

- 1 In what ways did conflicts between the executive and judiciary, along with broader political instability and institutional gridlock, affect the legitimacy and progress of democratic consolidation in Pakistan between 2008 and 2015?
- 2 How did corruption, patronage politics, and weak accountability mechanisms collectively hinder democratic consolidation in Pakistan during this period?
- 3 How did the politicization of state institutions, dysfunctional political parties, and weak electoral integrity undermine democratic consolidation and erode citizen trust in Pakistan's democratic process?
- 4 To what extent did fragile economic conditions and persistent terrorism undermine public trust and obstruct democratic consolidation in Pakistan from 2008 to 2015?

Theoretical Framework

The consolidation and deepening of democracy is a multifaceted process that have several turning dimensions, including democratic deepening, political institutionalization, and regime performance. Larry Diamond's (1999) conceptualization offers a comprehensive lens to analyse these dimensions in the context of Pakistan's democratic trajectory from 2008 to 2015. Deepening Democracy involves enhancing the liberal, accountable, representative, and participatory qualities of democratic systems. According to Diamond (1999), democratic deepening is characterized by the strengthening of democratic institutions and norms such as transparency, responsiveness, government accountability, protection of political rights and civil liberties, decentralization, and civilian supremacy over the military. In Pakistan, the period following the return to civilian rule in 2008 showed both advances and persistent deficits. While the 18th Constitutional Amendment signalled progress toward decentralization, implementation delays and political reluctance limited its effectiveness. Furthermore, the protection of civil liberties remained inconsistent, with laws like the Official Secrets Act suppressing dissent, and journalists facing censorship. Remarkably, civilian control over the military is an essential prerequisite for democratic consolidation which remained vague, as evidenced by military actions that undermined civilian supremacy (Diamond, 1999; Freedom House, 2013; Markey, 2013). Political Institutionalization relates to the development of stable, foreseeable political behaviour patterns supported by autonomous and robust institutions (Diamond, 1999). It is essential for managing conflict, ensuring governance, and sustaining democracy. Political institutionalization relies on merit-based bureaucracies, internal party democracy, legislative autonomy, and electoral integrity. However, in Pakistan from 2008 to 2015, political institutionalization was hindered by increased bureaucratic politicization, patronage-driven political parties, and legislative interference by the military and judiciary. Despite constitutional reforms such as the 18th Amendment, legislative autonomy remained constrained. Additionally, electoral inefficiencies and low voter turnout reflected widespread public disappointment, further weakening institutional trust. Weak accountability mechanisms allowed military influence and corruption to persist unchecked, undermining democratic governance (Diamond, 1999; Subba, 2017; Ware, 1996; O'Donnell, 1994). Regime Performance communicates to the regime's ability to deliver effective governance, policy outcomes, and political stability, which are essential to build public trust

and democratic legitimacy (Diamond, 1999). The PPP government (2008–2013), while completing a full democratic term for the first time, faced numerous challenges, including institutional conflicts, weak governance, corruption, and inadequate responses to terrorism. These performance issues contributed to public uncertainty about democracy's efficacy. Political volatility and fragile civilian control over key institutions further hindered democratic consolidation during this period (Diamond, 1999). Together, these theoretical components democratic deepening, political institutionalization, and regime performance form a robust framework to analyse the roadblocks to democracy in Pakistan between 2008 and 2015. They help elucidate how institutional weaknesses, civil-military imbalances, governance failures, and lack of public trust interacted to hinder democratic consolidation in the country.

Impediments to Democratic Consolidation: An Analysis of Key Souring Factors

Between 2008 and 2015, Pakistan faced a range of political, institutional, and structural challenges that hindered democratic consolidation, despite a formal return to civilian rule following General Pervez Musharraf's resignation. In the light of research questions and theoretical framework some souring factors in the way of democratic consolidation in Pakistan are discussed below.

1. Conflict between the Executive and Judiciary

Frequent conflicts between the judiciary and executive particularly during the tenure of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry created institutional gridlock and eroded public confidence in democratic institutions. Although the judiciary asserted independence, its activism was often seen as selective and politically motivated (International Crisis Group, 2010). The post-2008 period also witnessed significant tension between the executive and the judiciary, particularly following the reinstatement of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. A defining moment occurred when the Supreme Court declared the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) unconstitutional on December 16, 2009. This judgment reopened numerous corruption cases, including those against President Asif Ali Zardari, relating to assets held in Swiss bank accounts (Talbot, 2012). Despite the Court's directives, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani refused to write to Swiss authorities, arguing that Zardari enjoyed constitutional immunity. This led to the PPP's political adversaries PTI, PML-N, and Jamaat-e-Islami calling for Gilani's resignation. They also filed legal challenges against the Speaker's decision to shield Gilani from disqualification (Dawn, 2012). The PPP defended the Speaker's ruling by invoking the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which they argued conferred judicial powers on the Speaker (Rabani, 2016, p. 280). Nevertheless, Gilani was ultimately disqualified by the Supreme Court in June 2012, intensifying the ongoing struggle between state institutions. The judiciary also asserted itself by taking *Suo Motu* notice of a presidential order concerning judicial appointments in February 2010 and by overturning decisions of the Parliamentary Committee in 2011. These interventions sparked criticism from legal experts and PPP leaders, who accused the judiciary of exceeding its constitutional limits (Waseem, 2012, p. 16). This conflict destabilized the democratic balance, illustrating the fragile nature of checks and balances in Pakistan's political system. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies were often politicized, inefficient, and unable to protect citizens or ensure justice, weakening the foundation of constitutional democracy. In short conflicts between the executive and judiciary and institutional gridlock, badly affected the legitimacy and progress of democratic consolidation in Pakistan between 2008 and 2015.

2. Political Instability and Institutional Gridlock

Political instability was a defining feature of Pakistan's governance landscape between 2008 and 2015. This period was characterized by persistent power struggles among the executive, judiciary, and military, as well as internal conflicts within and between political parties. The lack of political consensus severely hampered the state's ability to develop and implement stable, long-term policy frameworks

essential for sustainable development. A central driver of this instability was the contentious relationship between Pakistan's civilian leadership and the military establishment. Historically, the military has played a dominant role in Pakistan's political affairs, often intervening directly or indirectly in governance (Riedel, 2011). Although civilian governments were formally in power during this period of 2008-2015, but there were civil-military tensions particularly regarding control over national security and foreign policy. These tensions weakened the authority of civilian institutions and contributed to a fragile political environment (Siddiqi, 2015). In parallel, the judiciary became an increasingly politicized arena. Courts were frequently involved in rulings with significant political ramifications, leading to what many observers termed judicial activism. This not only exacerbated tensions between the judiciary and executive branches but also contributed to institutional gridlock (Cheema, 2013). Disputes over judicial independence and reforms further deepened mistrust among political actors, undermining cohesive governance. The absence of political consensus on critical issues such as national security, civil-military relations, and judicial reform impeded the formulation of durable governance issues and strategies during civilian regime of 2008-2015. As political theorist Larry Diamond (1999) notes, the failure to build agreement on key governance issues undermines both democratic consolidation and effective statecraft (pp. 89–90). This instability also had tangible economic consequences. It discouraged both domestic and foreign investment, hindered economic growth, and contributed to growing public disillusionment with democratic governance (Khan, 2013). Pakistan's democratic institutions struggled to translate formal structures into effective governance, revealing the deeper challenges of democratic consolidation in a context marked by institutional conflict and weak political cohesion.

A particularly acute symptom of these challenges was the failure to maintain leadership in key state institutions during PML-N regime. During the tenure of the PML-N government, numerous important bodies including the Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the National Institute of Oceanography, and the National Database and Registration Authority remained without appointed leadership (The Express Tribune, 2014). This leadership vacuum resulted in administrative paralysis, diminished policy execution, and fostered undemocratic practices such as corruption and misuse of authority during PML-N regime from 2013-2017. One especially critical vacancy was that of the Chief Election Commissioner. After the resignation of Fakhruddin G. Ebrahim, the position remained unfilled for 16 months, despite four deadlines issued by the Supreme Court. The PML-N government's delay drew sharp criticism from opposition parties, including Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT), who challenged the legitimacy of the 2013 general elections. Such delays further weakened institutional credibility and intensified political polarization. These governance deficits during PML-N regime marked by corruption, weak institutions, and persistent instability had a profound negative impact on public trust and political participation. Citizens increasingly viewed elections and democratic institutions as ineffective mechanisms for addressing their needs. This disenchantment translated into widespread voter apathy. Many perceived political elites as self-serving and corrupt, uninterested in genuine public service (Khan, 2014). This growing disillusionment was reflected in the declining voter turnout during the 2013 general elections, despite their high political stakes (Freedom House, 2013; International IDEA, 2014). The weakening of core democratic institutions such as the judiciary, bureaucracy, and electoral bodies further deepened this sense of systemic dysfunction. Media reports and civil society assessments consistently highlighted pervasive corruption and governance failures, which eroded the legitimacy of democratic structures in Pakistan (Transparency International, 2012). This loss of faith extended beyond elections to broader forms of civic engagement. Participation in advocacy, protest, and community organizing remained

limited due to fears of repression, a lack of trust in political processes, and the absence of meaningful platforms for citizen voice (Shah, 2016). Such political disengagement curtailed democratic deepening, which depends not only on electoral cycles but also on active civil society and participatory governance. Finally, these failures in governance and democratic delivery created space for the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies. When democratic institutions fail to meet public expectations, non-democratic actors including the military and bureaucratic elites often step in, asserting control under the guise of national interest. These interventions further weakened democratic norms and obstructed the development of a stable, inclusive political order (Waseem, 2013).

3. Civil-Military Imbalance

Since the 1950s, Pakistan's civil-military relations have been extremely contentious, leading scholars to describe it as a "garrison state" or "praetorian state. For example, Markey (2013) argues that Pakistan's military maintains substantial influence over its political and economic spheres, while Singh et. al. (2013) similarly view it as a praetorian state. Rizvi (1997) also underscores the military's entrenched role in shaping political institutions. These patterns meaningfully hindered the strengthening of democracy from 2008 to 2015, particularly due to weak civilian institutions and widespread legitimacy issues (Rizvi, 1997). Jalal (1991) attributes the military's recurring interventions to weaknesses within political parties. A crucial institutional obstacle was the enduring dominance of the military in policymaking and national security. Even after the 2008 elections, the military retained control over foreign policy, internal security, and intelligence operations. General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, for instance, extended the influence of the armed forces by securing a three-year extension in 2010 and reinforcing military control over the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), bypassing civilian oversight (Markey, 2013, p. 30). This imbalance weakened civilian authority and eroded democratic governance. During the 2008 general election, the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) under Asif Ali Zardari sought coalition cooperation, particularly with the PML N (The Daily Dawn, 2009). Initially, the military led by General Kayani offered public support and ensured the overall alignment of national institutions with democratic processes, recalling military officers from civilian posts (Kanwal, 2017; Masood, 2008). Still, tensions emerged as the civilian government began to reclaim institutional authority. A notable case of friction was the 2009 National Logistics Cell (NLC) scandal, in which NLC officials illegally invested approximately 1.8 billion rupees. The military initially resisted a civilian-led investigation, and senior military officers were ultimately tried under military law a sign that even the military prioritized institutional autonomy, but on other side military leadership reminded to PPP leadership regarding the corruption of PPP ministers and even suggested action against them but political leadership remained silent instead of taking action (Shah, 2014). Military leadership was of the view that accountability should for all. Another issue so-called "Memogate" scandal aggravated civil-military tensions further. The memo allegedly sent by Ambassador Haqqani to U.S. officials sought American support to prevent a rumoured military coup following the Bin Laden incident. Its revelation deepened suspicions between civilian and military leadership (Associated Press, 2011; Geo News, 2011). Another significant episode that underscored the on-going tensions between the civil and military leadership emerged when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sought to hold former military ruler General Pervez Musharraf accountable, particularly by initiating treason charges against him. Several PML-N ministers issued strong statements criticizing the military and directly targeting Musharraf. These remarks were not well received by the military leadership, which publicly emphasized that the dignity and sanctity of the armed forces would be upheld at all costs. The situation revealed deep-seated differences between the civilian government and the military establishment. Ultimately, Musharraf was removed from the Exit Control List and allowed to leave the

country, reflecting the continued struggle over military accountability and the enduring imbalance in civil-military relations (Abbas, 2017). Between 2008 and 2015, even though civilian governments were formally in power, but civil-military tensions over control of national security and foreign policy. This tension undermined the authority of civilian institutions and contributed to a fragile political environment (Siddiq, 2015). It is necessary that for democratic consolidation civil military relations should be balanced.

4. Politicization and Weakness of State Institutions

The period from 2008 to 2015 in Pakistan was marked by substantial challenges in governance, largely due to the politicization and weakening of key state institutions. Both the judiciary and the bureaucracy critical pillars for upholding the rule of law and ensuring effective administration faced severe compromises in autonomy and functionality due to persistent political interference. During the tenure of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government from 2008 to 2013 and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government from 2013 to 2017, political interests frequently took precedence over meritocratic principles in the appointment and promotion of civil servants. Bureaucratic appointments were often based on loyalty to ruling parties rather than professional qualifications or administrative competence, thereby undermining institutional integrity and professionalism (International Crisis Group, 2010). The Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS), historically regarded as a neutral and competent body, was not immune to this politicization. The erosion of its neutrality diminished the PAS's ability to function as an effective and impartial administrative structure. Rather than operating as a merit-based civil service focused on public welfare and policy implementation, the bureaucracy became increasingly entangled in political patronage networks during PML-N regime. This not only reduced its capacity to deliver effective governance but also weakened public trust in administrative institutions (International Crisis Group, 2010). The consequences of institutional politicization were far-reaching. The judiciary responsible for ensuring constitutional compliance and legal oversight also came under scrutiny for perceived susceptibility to political influence. Such pressures compromised judicial independence, undermining the essential checks and balances of a democratic system. As a result, policy continuity and enforcement of laws were weakened, contributing to a broader erosion of confidence in state institutions and democratic governance during civilian regime 2008-2015. This environment of institutional weakness fostered inefficiency, corruption, and a lack of accountability issues that continue to have long-term implications for Pakistan's political stability and development route. It is important to explain that a political stability and governance demonstration comes through performance of national legislature of a country whereas Pakistan's National Assembly during this period was not much active in few areas. A key shortcoming was the delayed formation of Standing Committees, which are essential for legislative oversight, accountability, and detailed policy scrutiny. In some provincial assemblies, these committees were constituted after delays of 7 to 10 months, while the Baluchistan Assembly failed to form any throughout the legislative term. These delays significantly weakened legislative capacity. As Larry Diamond (1999) emphasizes, effective parliamentary committees play a critical role in ensuring democratic accountability and representing the public interest. Yet, the National Assembly failed to pass essential legislation such as laws to establish local government institutions in federally administered areas between 2008 and 2015. This legislative delay highlighted the lack of political will to strengthen democratic governance at the grassroots level. Moreover, executive engagement with parliamentary affairs was minimal. For instance, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif attended only 2% of the National Assembly's total sittings between 2013 and 2018, reflecting a disregard for the legislature's role in democratic governance. A functioning parliament must

legislate for socio-economic development, employment generation, infrastructure improvement, and effective citizen representation. When it fails in these core functions, it undermines the entire democratic process. In Pakistan's case, legislative inefficiency during 2008-2015 was further aggravated by interference from non-democratic forces, particularly the military and judiciary. This interference obstructed the development of autonomous and accountable political institutions, thereby impeding progress toward a more stable and representative democratic system.

5. Party Dysfunction and Street Politics

Internal dynamics within political parties added another layer of instability. Factionalism and inter-party rivalry particularly between the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) weakened coalition stability and prevented the development of coherent policy agendas during 2009-2013 (Rais, 2015). Political parties serve as essential vehicles for representation, policy development, and democratic accountability. According to Diamond (1999), no democracy can function effectively without robust and institutionalized political parties. However, in Pakistan, political parties have often operated as patronage-based entities dominated by familial elites, lacking internal democracy and ideological coherence. This significantly undermined their capacity to develop coherent policies, engage meaningfully with the public, and contribute to democratic deepening (Diamond, 1999, p. 96; Shafqat, 2010). In functioning democracies, political parties are expected to represent diverse constituencies, formulate sound policy agendas, and ensure accountability through electoral and institutional mechanisms (Janda, 2009; Ware, 1996). Yet, from 2008 to 2015, there were some confrontations between the parties. One of the most prominent political confrontations of this period revolved around the restoration of the deposed judiciary. In the Murree Declaration, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) agreed to reinstate judges removed during the Musharraf era within 30 days of forming the government in 2008. However, the PPP delayed implementation, concerned that Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry might reopen corruption cases under the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), threatening the party leadership. While the PML-N advocated for immediate restoration, the PPP pushed for a constitutional amendment rather than a simple parliamentary resolution. This disagreement led to political instability and eventually caused the PML-N to withdraw from the coalition government. The deadlock culminated in March 2009 with a nationwide lawyers' movement, supported by various opposition groups. Under significant pressure, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani finally announced the reinstatement of the judiciary, a decision widely viewed as a victory for civil society and democratic engagement. However, the episode highlighted deep inter-party mistrust and the prioritization of partisan interests over democratic commitments (Musarrat et al., 2012). Tensions also emerged around the issue of creating new provinces between political parties. After the renaming of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the PPP, supported by smaller parties and PML-Q, pushed for the creation of a Seraiki province in southern Punjab. In contrast, the PML-N opposed the division of Punjab but supported reviving the former Bahawalpur province. These debates over provincial restructuring revealed unresolved issues of ethnic identity, resource distribution, and political representation factors that further destabilized the political landscape. Diamond (1999) argues that vibrant, institutionalized political parties are indispensable for democratic consolidation. In Pakistan most parties lacked internal democracy, defined as open leadership elections, internal accountability, and inclusive decision-making structures (Ukaeje, 2011). Unfortunately in Pakistan leadership positions in parties were frequently filled through political patronage rather than merit, reinforcing dynastic politics. Despite overseeing democratic transitions and completing electoral cycles, parties like the PPP and PML-N were widely criticized for entrenched

patronage networks, internal factionalism, and widespread corruption (Shafqat, 2012; Waseem, 2014). These weaknesses not only eroded public trust but also impeded the development of accountable and responsive governance. The broader political culture in Pakistan has historically been shaped by confrontation rather than cooperation. Opposition parties have often opted for agitation over institutional engagement, frequently questioning electoral legitimacy and accusing ruling governments of manipulation and corruption. This pattern was particularly evident following the 2013 general elections, when the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by Imran Khan, rejected the results and launched a protest campaign alleging widespread rigging. In collaboration with the Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT), PTI organized a series of nationwide rallies, sit-ins, and strikes. The most disruptive of these was the 2014 sit-in (dharna) in Islamabad, which lasted over 120 days and significantly paralyzed the capital. The protest had severe economic and political repercussions. The Pakistani rupee depreciated from Rs 98.81 to Rs 103.18 per US dollar within weeks, delaying \$2.3 billion in foreign investments and disrupting government operations (Javed & Mamoon, 2017). The state allocated Rs 760.5 million in additional security expenditures, while the rupee depreciation contributed Rs 5.3 trillion to the national debt. The overall economic loss was estimated at \$6 billion (Dawn, 2014). Beyond the economic damage; the protests negatively impacted Pakistan's diplomatic relations. Notably, Chinese officials postponed high-level state visits due to instability, delaying critical developments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The political chaos not only tarnished Pakistan's international reputation but also created a power vacuum that invited increased military influence in civilian affairs (Javed & Mamoon, 2017). The 2014 dharna represented a dangerous precedent in Pakistani politics: the substitution of institutional mechanisms with street power. Instead of using, parliamentary debate, or judicial forums to resolve disputes, PTI relied on street agitation, undermining democratic norms and weakening institutional credibility. The failure of both the government and opposition to reach a negotiated settlement further revealed the absence of a culture of political reconciliation an essential component of democratic governance.

6. Weak Electoral Integrity and Democratic Trust

Electoral fraud, including vote rigging and manipulation, has long plagued Pakistan's political history. Practices such as ballot stuffing, the obstruction of eligible voters, and biased conduct by election officials have seriously undermined the credibility of electoral processes in the political history of Pakistan. These manipulations compromise the principle of representative democracy by allowing elected officials to gain power without genuine public support, thereby weakening both the legitimacy of democratic institutions and citizens' confidence in the system. When elections are rigged, they do not reflect the popular will, which not only violates fundamental democratic rights but also contributes to the emergence of unrepresentative and unaccountable governments. In the context of Pakistan's parliamentary system, electoral manipulation distorts the composition and effectiveness of legislatures, further hindering inclusive governance and democratic consolidation. During the election of 2008 and 2013 in Pakistan various forms of electoral interference have been reported in Pakistan, often involving the misuse of state machinery. Government functionaries including members of the judiciary, civil bureaucracy, and district administration have frequently been appointed as returning officers and presiding officers, many of whom align with ruling party interests. This alignment raises serious concerns about impartiality and transparency in election outcomes. Despite the regularity of elections during the 2008–2015 periods, systemic issues such as fraud, low voter turnout, and inadequate oversight mechanisms continued to erode electoral legitimacy. Voter participation was modest: 44.6% in 2008 and 53% in 2013 election in Pakistan. These figures, though slightly improved, reflected

persistent political disengagement, driven by perceptions that voting had little impact on governance outcomes (Diamond, 1999, p. 99; Freedom House, 2013). The 2013 general elections, although seen as a relative improvement in procedural transparency, were also marred by serious allegations of rigging. In Punjab, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was accused of vote manipulation, while similar claims were made against the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in Sindh. Partisan control of polling stations in both provinces further fuelled doubts about electoral fairness and integrity (Khan, 2017, p. 608). Low voter turnout also signalled widespread public disillusionment with the electoral system. Although the 2008 turnout marked an increase from previous elections, the figure still indicated deep scepticism fuelled by insecurity, political violence, and electoral malpractice (Cheema et al., 2008). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other conservative regions, women were systematically barred from voting, and many women-only polling stations recorded no votes at all (FAFEN, 2008). The 2013 elections saw higher voter participation around 55% yet several logistical and structural issues persisted. A critical problem in both elections was the inaccuracy of voter rolls. In 2008, the presence of millions of duplicate, out dated, or deceased voters severely undermined electoral credibility (National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2008). Ahead of the 2013 elections, efforts were made to address this issue through collaboration between the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), which led to the registration of over 36 million new voters and significant improvements in electoral data management (NDI, 2013). Following the 2008 elections, reform efforts included the establishment of parliamentary committees focused on improving electoral transparency. These initiatives sought to revise candidate eligibility criteria, enhance monitoring, and strengthen the autonomy of the ECP, while these reforms brought incremental progress; they fell short of addressing all systemic flaws. Electoral violence remained a pervasive threat in Pakistan during 2013 election. In 2013 elections, militant groups particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Baluchistan, and Karachi targeted candidates, party offices, and voters. This climate of fear discouraged political participation and compromised the integrity of electoral outcomes. In addition to violence and administrative weaknesses, the role of money in politics further distorted democratic competition. While parties such as the PPP and PML-N were criticized for excessive campaign spending, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) came under scrutiny for its reliance on overseas donations, raising concerns about foreign influence and financial disparities in electoral contests (Hamid Khan, 2017). Public confidence in the fairness and transparency of electoral processes was diminished.

7. Corruption and Patronage Politics

Corruption emerged as a deeply entrenched and pervasive challenge during the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government from 2008 to 2013, significantly undermining public trust in democratic institutions and impeding democratic consolidation. The period was marked by numerous high-profile corruption scandals implicating top political leaders, including then-President Asif Ali Zardari, which severely damaged the credibility and legitimacy of civilian governance (Transparency International, 2013). One of the most contentious issues was the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), promulgated in 2007 by the then-military ruler Pervez Musharraf. The NRO was designed to provide amnesty to politicians, bureaucrats, and public officials accused of corruption and other crimes prior to 2007, effectively shielding many influential figures from prosecution. The ordinance was widely criticized for fostering a culture of impunity and undermining the rule of law (Cheema, 2013). Despite its repeal by the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2009, the political fallout from the NRO lingered throughout the PPP tenure, casting a shadow over efforts to improve governance and accountability. The widespread perception that corruption was endemic within the PPP administration eroded democratic legitimacy and public

confidence. Corruption scandals involving embezzlement, mismanagement, and favouritism dominated political discourse, diverting attention from critical policy reforms and developmental agendas (Transparency International, 2013). For example, the Pakistan Steel Mills scandal, which exposed massive financial irregularities and losses during the PPP government, became emblematic of systemic corruption at the highest levels (Jalal, 2009). Investigations revealed manipulation in the allocation of contracts and procurement processes, resulting in losses estimated in the billions of rupees, further alienating the public from the political elite. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the primary anti-corruption institution, was often perceived as compromised and selective in its operations, frequently accused of political bias and inefficiency during this period (Khan, 2014). Instead of functioning as an impartial body to hold corrupt officials accountable, the NAB was sometimes viewed as a tool manipulated by those in power to target political adversaries selectively, thereby undermining its credibility and the broader accountability framework. Corruption's corrosive impact extended beyond institutional distrust; it also weakened democratic legitimacy by fostering distrust about the effectiveness and fairness of the political system. Public disillusionment with civilian leadership grew, reinforcing voter apathy and skepticism regarding the promises of democracy to deliver justice and equitable governance (Cheema & Naseer, 2015). This erosion of trust hindered efforts to deepen democratic participation and accountability, as citizens increasingly perceived their elected representatives as self-interested and disconnected from public welfare. Between 2008 and 2015, Pakistan witnessed serious governance deficits. Relations between the executive and judiciary were confrontational, corruption was persistent, and state institutions struggled to function effectively. During PML-N regime there was delays in counter-terrorism strategy, poor immunization performance, and recurring electricity shortages highlighted the government's inability to meet citizens' basic needs. The Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) reported in 2014 that public satisfaction with institutional performance under the PML-N was low. Despite extensive legislative activity during the PPP tenure, practical implementation was lacking. Similarly, the PML-N government failed to address private members' bills or strengthen parliamentary oversight. Corruption, a key indicator of governance failure, was rampant. High-profile corruption scandals during PPP regime (2008-2013) were like (1) The 2010 Hajj corruption scandal involving the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2) Accusations against Federal Minister Dr. Asim Hussain and Secretary Ejaz Chaudhry for embezzling over Rs. 460 billion between 2010 and 2013. (3) Allegations against Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's family regarding unpaid loans from public banks. (4) Judicial corruption, including the controversial dealings between Malik Riaz and the son of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. President Zardari was widely criticized by society due to corruption of his ministers and party workers.

8. Problem of Accountability and Rule of Law

The challenges of accountability and the rule of law have been critical obstacles to democratic consolidation in Pakistan. Weaknesses within the country's accountability mechanisms and legal frameworks significantly delayed democratic progress during the period from 2008 to 2015. While Pakistan experienced notable political and institutional developments during this era, issues surrounding accountability and adherence to the rule of law remained central concerns. Under the civilian governments of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) from 2008 to 2015, institutions such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) were frequently perceived as instruments of political manipulation rather than genuine bodies for ensuring accountability. These institutions were often used to target political adversaries selectively, which severely undermined their credibility and fostered a culture of selective accountability (Hamid Khan,

2017). Both the PPP and PML-N administrations faced widespread allegations of corruption, which eroded public confidence in elected leaders and diminished the legitimacy of democratic governance. The judiciary, particularly under Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, played an activist role by intervening in executive affairs under the banner of accountability. While judicial oversight was essential for checking executive excesses, this activism sometimes disrupted democratic processes, exemplified by the 2012 disqualification of the then Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani (Cheema, 2013). Despite these interventions, Pakistan's judicial system remained plagued by inefficiency and limited access to justice, further weakening the rule of law and reducing public trust in democratic institutions. Civilian governments struggled to assert full control over the military, contributing to an imbalance in the power structure and undermining democratic norms (Riedel, 2011). This power unevenness posed a significant barrier to democratic consolidation in Pakistan, as it limited the authority of civilian institutions responsible for accountability and governance. The importance of robust and transparent accountability mechanisms in democratic consolidation cannot be overstated. Historical democratic systems, such as ancient Athens, implemented comprehensive audit systems to hold public officials accountable and maintain the legitimacy of governance (Manin, 1997). Accountability fosters transparency, enhances public trust, and legitimizes political authority (Bogdanor, 2007). Democracies rely on the rule of law, accountability structures, legislatures, judiciary, and executive to ensure political actors are answerable to the public (Diamond, 1999). During the period 2008-2015 there was the problem of accountability and rule of Law in Pakistan. Without state capacity, effective accountability cannot be enforced, as institutional checks and balances require competent and autonomous bodies to function (Donnell, 1994; Diamond, 1999). During the PPP government (2008–2013), the rule of law was compromised by political interference and lack of transparency. For instance, the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) initially granted immunity to several politicians, including then-President Asif Ali Zardari, from corruption cases, undermining accountability efforts. Although the Supreme Court revoked the NRO in 2009, corruption scandals persisted, severely damaging the government's credibility (Transparency International, 2011). One prominent example was the Pakistan Steel Mills scandal, wherein corruption and mismanagement led to losses amounting to billions of rupees during PPP regime. Investigations by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and the NAB were reportedly obstructed by political interference, including controversial changes in the FIA's leadership orchestrated by then Interior Minister Rehman Malik to shield influential PPP main figures (Dawn, 2009; Hamid Khan, 2017). Additionally, the loss or disappearance of over 180 corruption case files from NAB in 2010 further highlighted the lack of political will to enforce accountability in Pakistan (Dawn, 2016). During the Zardari era, accountability mechanisms were weakened by political interference, legislative obstacles, and operational inefficiencies within NAB.

9. Fragile Economic Conditions

Larry Diamond's theoretical insights are instrumental in understanding regime challenges. He asserts that for democracy to consolidate, it must deliver effective policy outcomes and ensure economic performance that generates broad political legitimacy. In Pakistan, both the PPP-led government and the PML-N-led government faced serious regime performance challenges in their respective tenure. These included economic instability, energy crises, weak governance, corruption, and rising public dissatisfaction. The state's heavy reliance on external actors particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for economic decision-making further complicated governance, often detaching policy from democratic accountability. Diamond explains that poor regime performance may produce three destabilizing outcomes: (1) democratic breakdown, (2) persistent fragility, or (3) partial democratic

survival with compromised legitimacy. During the 2008–2015 periods, Pakistan’s economy remained weak and underperforming. The fiscal deficit reached Rs. 700 billion in the 2010–2011 budgets, with the PPP government resorting to borrowing rather than implementing structural reforms. Between 2008 and 2013, the annual economic growth rate hovered around 3 per cent. This sluggish growth, compounded by a severe energy crisis where the electricity shortfall exceeded 3,000 megawatts crippled industrial productivity and daily life. Both PML-N and PPP relied on foreign loans. The government introduced welfare programs such as the Benazir Income Support Programme and increases in public sector salaries and pensions. However, these measures were not supported by adequate revenue generation or structural reforms, leading to inflation and fiscal imbalances. Successive resignations of State Bank governors reflected the growing institutional unease with the government's economic policies during this period. The economic freedom was not high rated during this period 2008-2015. As Sodaro (2001) note, economic freedom is a precondition for political freedom. The correlation between economic decline and democratic fragility was evident in Pakistan during this period, as growing disillusionment with elected leader’s fostered support for undemocratic alternatives.

10. Terrorism and Violence in Pakistan

The surge of terrorism in Pakistan over the past decades has posed grave challenges to national security and stability. The period between January 2008 and April 2009 witnessed a dramatic escalation in extremist violence, with 1,843 attacks resulting in the deaths of 1,394 citizens (Aijaz Maher, 2009). These attacks included suicide bombings, rocket strikes, and remote-controlled explosions. A significant wave of insurgency spread across the Swat Valley, South and North Waziristan, and other parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which encompass the regions of Orakzai, Khyber Mohmand, Bajaur, Kurram, and both North and South Waziristan. When the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) came to power in 2008, it prioritized combating extremism and terrorism. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani swiftly proposed a policy centered on engagement and negotiation with the Taliban to restore peace in FATA. He also advocated for new anti-terrorism legislation (Daily Times, 2008). Firstly, to cultivate national ownership of the war on terror and shift public perception that it was not merely an American agenda; secondly, to restore peace and stability in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP); and thirdly, to pursue resolution through dialogue and political consultation. However, as these measures failed to yield tangible progress, the government reconsidered its strategy. Consensus emerged around the necessity of a comprehensive military operation against Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements. In May 2009, a large-scale military offensive was launched in the Swat Valley and Malakand Division, with full backing from the government, opposition, and the general public. The social and economic costs were immense, as noted by Pakistan’s former chief economist (Dawn, 2009). Kurram and Khyber agencies were among the most severely affected, with over 425,000 people displaced in 2012, and at least 130,000 more forced to flee between March 2013 and the end of that year. Violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors intensified along the Afghan border. High-profile assassination attempts, such as those targeting Prime Minister Gilani in September 2008 and Minister for Religious Affairs Hamid Saeed Kazmi in September 2009, resulted in arrests but no convictions. Across the country, urban violence surged. In Karachi, political rivalries led to hundreds of murders, with the state largely failing to restore order. Pakistan also confronted multiple internal conflicts during this period: ethnic tensions, sectarian strife, the war on terror, and inter-provincial discord. Religious minorities Shiites, Ahmadis, and Christians were frequent targets. In Baluchistan, nationalist groups demanded autonomy and regularly sabotaged infrastructure, including railway lines, gas pipelines, and power transmission systems. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) remained a major threat throughout 2013 and 2014, carrying out numerous

suicide attacks across the country. In response, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan in 2014. The same year one of the most terrible attacks took place in Pakistan's history on the Army Public School in Peshawar killing over 160 children and staff. In Karachi, targeted killings intensified, with approximately 5,909 people killed between 2013 and 2014. This persistent violence reflected the deep-rooted political, ethnic, and criminal complexities in the city.

Conclusion

The period between 2008 and 2015 was pivotal for Pakistan's democratic trajectory, marked by both significant progress and persistent setbacks. Despite the historic transition of power through democratic elections and notable constitutional reforms enhancing provincial autonomy, Pakistan's democratic consolidation faced considerable roadblocks. Political instability fuelled by weak party structures, entrenched patronage, and corruption undermined public confidence in democratic institutions. Simultaneously, the pervasive influence of non-state militant actors, alongside deep-rooted civil-military tensions, constrained the effective functioning of civilian governance. Additionally, challenges within the judiciary and civil society, while occasionally advancing democratic accountability, often contributed to political volatility. These souring factors collectively impeded the establishment of a resilient democratic culture. Therefore, overcoming these roadblocks requires strengthening institutional integrity, fostering political inclusivity, and addressing security challenges to lay a sustainable foundation for democracy in Pakistan.

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