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Competitive Authoritarianism and the Breakdown of Political Pluralism in Pakistan (2018-2022)

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Abstract: This study examines the treatment with the political opposition by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government (2018-2022) through the framework of competitive authoritarianism, focusing on the decline of political pluralism within the political system. Analyzing the vast data collected from secondary sources as well as insights from twenty-four respondents, the study reveals that democratic cooperation, tolerance, appeasement and pluralism, which characterized the past governments of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) during 2008-2013 and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government during 2013-2018, sharply declined during this era. All the respondents shared strong evidence of the government's preferences for non-elected institutions, especially the military establishment at the cost of parliamentary procedure, while 83.3% of the interviewees stated that the government considered the opposition as an existential threat and therefore actively sought to eliminate its main leadership. The remaining 16.7% respondents partially differed by attributing these activities of the government as routine political rivalry in a parliamentary setup. Overall, the findings indicate the coincidence of competitive authoritarianism with the PTI government and the erosion of political pluralism from the political spectrum during the whole tenure.

Introduction

For a democratic system as claimed by Pakistan, the presence of political pluralism in the form of a meaningful competition among all the political actors within the constitutional boundary is highly necessary. However, when we see the political history of Pakistan, it has mostly lacked it due to frequent military interventions, weak civilian institutions, judicial activism, immature political parties, and lack of political tolerance. In this connection, the period between 2008 and 2018 was a big move forward toward political pluralism. Starting from the Charter of Democracy as signed by the two major political parties of Pakistan; the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party

(PPP) in 2006 and later agreed to many other parties, it saw inter-party cooperation, effective parliamentary debates and consensus-building, improved government-opposition relations and discouragement of the military interference from both benches.

However, after the general elections of 2018 the political environment once again derailed the democratic trajectory. This time, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was for the first time in government benches at the federal level, while the ex-ruling parties such as the PML-N, PPP, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), and Awami National Party (ANP) were in opposition. After the elections, although these parties raised serious questions over the electoral process, they still opted to sit in Parliament and expressed a willingness to cooperate with the government especially regarding economic reforms, the Kashmir issue, and the COVID-19 pandemic. But the government, unfortunately instead of welcoming it, refused political engagement with the opposition parties, portraying them as corrupt, illegitimate, and dynastic parties, rejected by the electorates. It was for the first time in the whole history of Pakistan that the opposition extended its support to the government, but the latter instead of welcoming ridiculed it in return. It marked a clear break from the post-Charter of Democracy (2006) culture of accommodating and encouraging the opposition, and, in return, expecting cooperation, participation, and the avoidance of unnecessary opposition to the government. It led the Parliament to be dysfunctional and made the government overdependent on presidential ordinances. At the same time, it also opened the door for powerful institutions including the military establishment, National Accountability Bureau (NAB), and the judiciary to influence political decisions. Reports by human rights organizations and international democracy indices documented restrictions on political rights, media freedom, and civic space during this time.

Here, a question arises as to how the political system of Pakistan transformed from an era of relatively ideal democratic government-opposition relations to a situation where opposition parties are rejected, ridiculed, delegitimized, marginalized, and treated as a threat to the state. This stark contrast between the relatively cooperative, pluralistic decade (2008-2018) and the contentious, restrictive environment of 2018-2022 presents a central research puzzle for this study. Instead of finding the causes behind this transformation, this study concentrates on analyzing the processes, mechanisms, and practices through which political pluralism was curtailed during the later period. One of the reasons for this approach is that before one can explain the underlying causes behind this transformation, one must be first clear on what exactly the transformation constitutes.

For this purpose, the study employs both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary data provide historical and institutional context, while primary data from personal interviews offer insights into perceptions of delegitimization, state coercion, civil-military dynamics, and the discursive framing of political dissent. By examining these dynamics through the lens of competitive authoritarianism, the study reveals how in the presence of formal democratic institutions, political pluralism started disappearing.

Theoretical Framework: Competitive Authoritarianism

This study draws on the theoretical framework of competitive authoritarianism, as presented by Levitsky and Way (2002), to analyze how political pluralism in Pakistan was limited during the PTI government (2018-2022). In competitive authoritarianism, democratic institutions like the legislature, executive, judiciary and election commission do exist. But when it comes to practice, the incumbent undermines the democratic norms that govern them so frequently that it appears authoritarian in nature. As a result, democracy remains in theory but not in practice there. In such a system, opposition parties exist and even participate in elections, but face multiple institutional, legal, and extralegal

pressures that limit their capacity to function effectively.

Key Concepts

1. Political Pluralism

Political pluralism refers to the political environment, where all the political actors hold different viewpoints regarding the political system, openly compete to get into power, and influence state policy without any fear of repression from the state institutions. In this study, political pluralism is assessed through some key dimensions like government-opposition relations, parliamentary activities, judicial decisions, civil-military relations, and over-dependence presidential ordinances.

2. Delegitimization of Opposition

Competitive authoritarianism often portrays the opposition parties as threats to national interest. This study explores how political leaders belonging to the opposition parties, especially the PML-N, the PPP and the JUI were branded as traitors and subsequently subjected to judicial and NAB trials, media delegitimization, and administrative restrictions.

3. Power Structure and Party Marginalization

In Pakistan, the state institutions particularly the military establishment often plays a dominant role in shaping political outcomes. The study uses this concept to examine how the state's institutions contributed to cornering opposition parties, discouraging parliamentary activities, and concentrating political authority.

4. Erosion of Democratic Norms

In competitive authoritarian government democratic norms are frequently violated while at the same time maintaining only the outward appearance of democracy. During 2018-2022 the PTI government followed these lines by excessive reliance on the military establishment for the passage of parliamentary legislation, over-dependence on presidential ordinances, the marginalization of opposition parties from parliamentary debates, and preparing political cases against the opposition leadership. This framework helps to illustrate how these activities were carried out to shape political outcomes.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study, for which both primary and secondary data have been consulted to investigate how political opposition in Pakistan was treated during 2018-2022. The qualitative approach was chosen to obtain rich, contextual, and interpretive insights into the processes and mechanisms that constrained political pluralism. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews from 24 respondents, selected by purposive sampling method based on their relevance to the topic. Accordingly, first of all ten parliamentarians who served in the National Assembly or Senate during the given period (2018-2022), five belonging to the governing party (PTI) and five to the opposition (PDM) were interviewed. Then, twelve professors of Political Science from four leading universities of Pakistan, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, International Islamic University Islamabad, the University of Peshawar, and Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan were approached. They were chosen first on basis of their expertise in the subject, and secondly due to their demonstrated interest in the research topic when consulted for the interview purpose. Moreover, two political analysts associated with national media outlets were interviewed to get broad insights. During interview, some respondents agreed to be cited by name, while others requested for keeping confidential, which the researcher duly followed in the paper.

Secondary data were included from different research articles, HEC-approved theses, Newspapers, reports of national and international organizations, such as V-Dem, Freedom House, PILDAT, and FAFEN, parliamentary records, and official documents.

The collected data were analyzed by using thematic analysis method. First of all, from the collected data recurring themes like political harassment, delegitimization, military interference, and executive overreach were identified. Then the themes were connected to broader patterns of competitive authoritarianism, to map the sequences of events that how opposition parties were systematically treated as threats. Combining the primary data from interviews with secondary data further strengthened the validity, reliability, and credibility of the findings.

Political Pluralism in Pakistan (2008-2018): A Decade of Democratic Cooperation and Political Maturity

Political pluralism, characterized by meaningful competition among political actors within institutional frameworks, is very important for proper functioning of a democratic system. In Pakistan, however, this pluralism has historically been inconsistent, hindered by frequent military interferences, weak civilian institutions, and shifting norms of political tolerance. In this connection, the period between 2008 and 2018 stands out as particularly significant, representing an era of political cooperation and democratic maturity. After the 1999 military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistani politics underwent a transformation. By this time, the two mainstream political parties, the PPP and the PML-N, had learned from the conflict-driven politics of the 1990s and were no longer willing to serve as instruments of the military establishment against each other. They decided to start the politics of reconciliation, tolerance, coordination and accommodation. That created an environment of mutual harmony and appeasement, which eventually led to the signing of a historic agreement the "Charter of Democracy" (CoD) on May 14, 2006, in London. Some significant points of the CoD were agreement on some very necessary constitutional amendments, some important codes of conduct, arrangement on free and fair elections and best possible civil-military relations etc. On July 2, 2006, few other political parties like the Pakistan Democratic Party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan, Jamiat Ahle Hadith, Jamhoori Watan Party and Pakistan Christian Party also signed the Charter. Now at that occasion, most of the mainstream political parties were on one page and fully determined to strengthen democracy in Pakistan (Sheikh, 2022).

The period following the Charter of Democracy (2006) marked a golden phase of political cooperation between the government and opposition in Pakistan, particularly between the two major political parties, the PPP and the PML-N. Despite being political competitors and currently on opposite benches, both the parties respected a shared commitment to civilian supremacy, democratic continuity, and non-interventionist politics, avoiding the traditional pattern of mutual delegitimization and seeking strengthening institutional norms as agreed through the Charter of Democracy. This political detente culminated in a landmark democratic milestone in 2013, with the first peaceful transfer of power between two elected civilian governments and laid the foundation for continued electoral transitions despite growing political polarization due to PTI non-compliance. While the PTI remained outside this cooperative framework and focused its delegitimization efforts primarily on the PML-N government, the broader political environment between the PPP and PML-N reflected an unprecedented level of restraint and maturity among Pakistan's main civilian actors. However, in 2018, when PTI came to power, this naive culture of political cooperation, non-interference, tolerance, and mutual appeasement finally breathed its last. According to Respondent No. 13 (personal communication, May 29, 2024), an associate professor at a public-sector university, the culture of participation, cooperation, accommodation, avoiding unnecessary opposition to the government and encouragement of the opposition's participation had developed in our political system just after the Charter of Democracy (2006). It continued during the government of the PPP (2008-2013) and that of the PML-N (2013-2018). But unfortunately, that beautiful culture breathed its last with the establishment of PTI government in 2018.

The decade from 2008 to 2018 marks a significant chapter in Pakistan's democratic evolution. For the first time in the country's history, two consecutive civilian governments, the government of PPP and the government of PML-N completed their full five-year terms. This continuity of the parliamentary process reflected growing political stability. The general elections of 2013 and 2018 further reinforced this trend, with peaceful and constitutional transfers of power from one elected civilian government to another. These democratic milestones signaled a break from Pakistan's history of frequent interruptions by military interventions. Overall, the period demonstrated a notable strengthening of democratic norms and institutions (Stiftung, 2019). Some major achievements due to this productive government-oppositions relations were the deletion of the article 58-2(B) from the constitution, enhancing provincial autonomy, abolishment of the concurrent list of power, giving recognition to the province of NWFP as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, abolishing the limit of two-times premiership, establishment of transparent caretaker governments before every general elections, ensuring the independence of judiciary and the Election Commission of Pakistan, etc. But unfortunately, that cooperative behavior exhibited by the government and opposition parties during 2008-2018 was dismissed, dramatized and labeled by PTI and the military establishment as *Mukmuka* (a marriage of convenience). In fact, they wanted to revive the tri-polar democracy which existed in Pakistan from the very beginning. In a tri-polar democracy apart from government and opposition there exists another powerful body (establishment) where lies the actual authority. This third body often supports the opposition to creating problems for the government. Sometimes it takes the government's side to suppress the opposition. Consequently, when PTI came to power as a result of 2018 elections, it abandoned the cooperative approach of the previous decade and maintained close ties with the military establishment as a safeguard against opposition pressures (Hayat, 2023).

From Democratic Cooperation to Authoritarian Crackdown: The Decline of Political Pluralism (2018-2022)

While the decade from 2008 to 2018 reflected a period of political cooperation, appeasement, tolerance and strengthening of democratic institutions, the landscape shifted dramatically after the general elections of 2018. The democratic gains of the previous era were gradually undermined as competitive authoritarian tendencies emerged, with increased centralization of power, heightened executive overreach, and selective targeting of opposition parties. Civil-military influence reasserted itself more overtly, and parliamentary debate and effectiveness were curtailed, signaling a marked departure from the cooperative politics that had characterized the earlier decade. After the elections, though the opposition parties like the PML-N, PPP, JUI-F and JI knew that there had been big level rigging in the election, they decided to sit in the assembly and give an opportunity to PTI to form government. In the very first session of the National Assembly, the opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif said to Imran Khan, "*well, we don't accept the elections' results, but even then, we are here to support you*". He also offered the "*charter of economy*" to him which he meant to cooperate with each other irrespective of party affiliation for bringing economic stability to the country (The News, 2022, August 14). But the government refused to sit with the opposition. It was first time in the whole history of Pakistan that the opposition extended its support to the government, but the government instead of welcoming ridiculed it in return. The PTI leadership, especially Imran Khan, never wanted to sit with the opposition, even on issues of national importance. He considered it as insult to his person to handshake, talk, sit or discuss anything with the opposition parties. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic the opposition parties made a public offer to the ruling PTI for cooperation in the fight against the disease. But the PTI government again did not take any interest in collaborating with the opposition parties and instead accused them of

point scoring amid the crisis (Faiz, 2024).

This behavior of PTI led it to render the parliament ineffective and resulted in an overdependence on the presidency for ordinance issuance. As a result, during its tenure (2018-2022), the PTI government issued 77 Presidential ordinances, the highest number issued under any regime in the country's political history, while it managed to pass only 158 bills through Parliament, barely twice the number of ordinances (Hanif, 2022). Another notable aspect of the legislation under this government was that it passed 33 out of these 158 bills in a single day during a joint sitting of Parliament on 17 November 2021 (*Friday Times*, 2023, August 10).

According to the Freedom House (2018) report, the status of the right to participate in elections for political parties in 2018 was 3/4, that indicates partial freedom where some political candidates while contesting election faced barriers including legal, procedural, or institutional. However, on question whether political choices were free from domination by undemocratic forces it scored 1/4, that reflects significant interference by non-elected institutions, which undermines the fairness and independence of political competition. Overall, its scores for 2018 were 2/4, 2019: 1/4, 2020: 2/4, 2021: 2/4, and for 2022: 2/4. According to Freedom House (2020) report, both the former governing parties, the PML-N and the PPP were highly disrupted by multiple cases against their leadership as well as party workers. The cases included corruption charges, breach of media regulations, and participation in unauthorized demonstrations. The sufferers included former PM Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz, former Punjab CM Shahbaz Sharif, former PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, former president Asif Ali Zardari, Faryal Talpur, and much other second ranked party leadership. They spent most of the year in jail. The judicial harassment was a continuation of the pre-poll activities against the mainstream political parties especially the PML-N, which featured the effective removal of Nawaz Sharif from political life through a series of dubious court decisions.

Similarly, according to Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index, the Electoral Process & Pluralism score for Pakistan in 2018 was 6.08/10, 2019: 6.08/10, 2020: 5.67/10, 2021: 5.67/10 and in 2022: 4.25/10. It shows that, throughout this era Pakistan experienced short of political pluralism, especially in the latter years it shifted more towards authoritarianism (*Dawn*, 2024, February 16). The V-Dem (2021) graph for political rights in Pakistan shows a score of 0.33/1 for the years 2018 to 2021, and data for later years is not available. So, it also indicates constrained political rights.

The *Express Tribune* (2019, December 30) provided a detailed account of the mistreatment of opposition parties under the title "Pakistan's Prison Politics: Who was in and who was out in 2019?". According to this, many big names of opposition parties, especially belonging to PML-N and PPP, were sent to jail mostly in corruption charges framed against them. Starting from the top leadership, the former PM Nawaz Sharif was punished to seven years' imprisonment in the Al-Azizia reference case on December 24, 2018. Next in the queue were the PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif and his colleagues Khawaja Saad Rafique and Khawaja Salman Rafique who were caught in Ashiana-e-Iqbal Housing scam and Paragon Housing Society cases respectively. In June 2019 the PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari his sister Faryal Talpur were arrested in fake accounts case. Similarly, in the same month the PML-N Vice-President and the then opposition leader in the Punjab Assembly Hamza Shehbaz had to face the prison in connection with Ramzan Sugar Mills and Saaf Paani project. In the following month, the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) detained PML-N Punjab President Rana Sanaullah for allegedly possessing 15kg drugs in his vehicle. In the same month the NAB arrested the former PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi in a case associated with liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal project. In August 2019 NAB arrested PML-N Vice-President Maryam Nawaz with her cousin Yousaf Abbas Sharifin over the Chaudhry Sugar Mills case. In

September 2019 NAB arrested a senior leader of PPP Khursheed Shah in a case titled possession of assets beyond means. Similarly, in December 2019 another senior leader of the PML-N Ahsan Iqbal was arrested by NAB in connection with alleged corruption in Narowal Sports City (NSC) Project. The process of arrest and torture continued throughout the tenure, though some of them received partial relief in the form of bail, temporary release, or discharging of some very weak cases by the courts. However, when the PTI government was ousted in April 2022, all of them received significant legal relief due to lack of evidence, procedural flaws, or prosecutorial withdrawal.

Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2022) also noted the PTI government for expanding crackdown on opposition parties throughout its tenure. It reported that the government authorities harassed and detained journalists and other members of civil society and especially the supporters of opposition parties for criticizing the government policies. The opposition leadership particularly belonging to PML-N and PPP were subjected to high-profile corruption investigations, arrests, NAB trials, and court cases. Most of them were politically motivated attempts to weaken and intimidate the opponents. However, the government claimed that it was carrying out accountability to bring the corruption of past governments to justice (Hashim, 2022). According to (Dawn News, 2023) the military was one of the major causes of the lack of pluralism in politics. In fact, the military has created a culture of political instability and a lack of trust in the civilian process. As a result, political parties are mostly looking for military support instead of focusing on representing the interests of their constituents. Without a range of competing political parties and perspectives, it has become difficult for the government to be fully aware of the needs and concerns of all citizens.

Insights from Primary Sources

1. Delegitimization of the Opposition

The period between 2018-2022 witnessed a marked shift in Pakistan's political discourse, characterized by a systematic delegitimization of opposition parties by the ruling party under Prime Minister Imran Khan. Departing from the newly established norms of political engagement and pluralism, the opposition was branded as corrupt, criminal, and illegitimate actors whose presence was framed as detrimental to the nation's progress. This rhetoric went beyond mere political rivalry, evolving into a narrative that portrayed opposition leaders as enemies of the state's interest, thieves, mafia, and incompetent individuals deserving no dialogue or cooperation from the state. Such framing served to justify the exclusion and repression of political pluralism, a hallmark of competitive authoritarianism, and signaled a contraction of democratic space in Pakistan.

When the researcher contacted the targeted sample to document their views, all 24 interviewees notably voiced serious concern over the lack of political pluralism during this period, citing the shrinking democratic space and the systematic targeting of opposition leadership, particularly those belonging to the PML-N and PPP, who according to them, faced undue legal and institutional persecution that undermined fair competition and democratic norms.

According to Respondent No. 4 (personal communication, May 25, 2024), a senior faculty member at a public university, after the general elections of 2018, the democratic culture that had gradually taken root between 2008 and 2018, marked by political engagement, tolerance, and inter-party cooperation, was openly undermined by the PTI leadership, which avoided even meeting or engaging with the opposition leaders.

"The government did not want to involve the opposition in any policy. It sidelined the opposition all the time, except the occasion of extension to the then Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Apparently, it looks that perhaps for this purpose it was brought into power, so that the signatories of the Charter of

Democracy could be taught a lesson”.

Respondent No. 13 (personal communication, May 29, 2024), a senior professor at a public-sector university, told that the PTI government during this period was not in a mood even to talk to the opposition.

“To the surprise of everyone, this time the government was reluctant to sit with the opposition even on the agenda of national importance and interest. The PM Imran Khan continued with his pre-poll slogan, that the leadership of other parties (opposition) are corrupt, they are thieves, they are mafia, they are incompetent, and I don’t need to sit with them regarding any matter”.

A. Akbar (personal communication, May 26, 2024), an ex-MNA belonging to JI, narrated some important incidents regarding the status of political pluralism during that period. He said that on August 5th, 2019, when the Indian government revoked the special status granted under Article 370 of the Indian constitution to Jammu and Kashmir, the opposition itself offered its unconditional support to the government. But unfortunately, this time again Imran Khan was unwilling to sit with the opposition parties. He kept on repeating his famous saying, *“I am not going to sit and discuss anything with the thieves or in other words, to give them NRO”*. Similarly, he said in February 2020, at the occasion of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visit and his address in the National Assembly Imran again avoided to meet the opposition. After his address in the assembly, he was led to PM house through Speaker’s office instead of introducing him to the members of the opposition while going through the corridor. Likewise, at the occasion of the passage of FATF law 2020, the State Bank of Pakistan Amendment Bill, 2021 whereby making it independent of the government control and putting the dollar in open market the opposition was totally side-lined. Through this amendment an IMF representative was included in the Board of Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan.

Respondent No. 14 (personal communication, May 16, 2024), a senior professor at a public university, presented a very dark picture of Imran’s government. He narrated:

“During that period democracy was totally fractured. It was not a healthy democracy. We can say that with Imran Khan democracy didn’t come with a sound health. The fact is that Imran Khan does not believe in democracy. History shows that he has not tolerated even his own party men, so there is no question of political pluralism from him. He is an absolute example of a fascist leader. He is a proud man, who believes that he can do anything alone. He believes that he is like a god, who can understand and work like a god. He believes that God has trained him to lead the people just like a prophet”.

Respondent No. 15 (personal communication, May 25, 2024), an assistant professor at a public-sector university, pointed out that during the PTI government (2018-2022) Shazbaz Sharif was the opposition leader, with whom Imran Khan didn’t handshake even for a single time. He ignored all opposition members and consistently maintained his narrative that they were thieves, dacoits, and corrupt, thereby justifying his refusal to engage with them.

“He didn’t give them any respect. He passed disgraceful remarks on them even from abroad. So, there was no question of encouragement for opposition to participate in state affairs. It was a big blunder on the part of Imran Khan.

A. H. K. Hoti (personal communication, May 31, 2024), an ex-MNA belonging to ANP, also shared almost similar observation. According to him:

“The opposition parties offered the government to support her on a minimum common agenda, like on a charter of democracy, a charter of economy, Kashmir issue, and security issues, but Imran Khan ridiculed the offers. He was not ready to sit with his opponents even after the vote of no confidence. His eyes were still on the establishment, because he considers it the center of power.”

According to Respondent No. 6 (personal communication, May 14, 2024), a senior journalist, "*Imran had in his mind that establishment was with him, so he did not need to sit and discuss anything with the opposition. He used to say a very popular sentence for the opposition that, "Choron k sat ni betun ga (I won't sit with the thieves).*"

Respondent No. 1 (personal communication, May 29, 2024), a senior professor at a public university, said that the opposition parties were kept quite weak during that period. Because the way the PTI in its past years developed the narrative that these are the parties that are corrupt, family oriented and thieving etc. This very narrative of PTI had turned into a popular voice. Moreover, people had expected that PTI's rise to power would mark a break from past political practices and offer something different from traditional parties.

"However, unfortunately it surpassed previous traditions of personal revenge and vendetta by aggressively targeting opposition, including the registration of fabricated FIRs. Similarly, regarding elections the people were expecting that the PTI posture would be upright, but in the Senate elections for its chairmanship back in 2021 many opposition parties was bulldozed. Sadiq Sanjrani of PTI was brought by maneuvering the elections against the nominee of majority party; PPP and PML-N. That was quite shattering. So, these are the few things in which we can say that the PTI has arbitrarily tried to bulldoze the role of the opposition".

Similarly, A. Latif (personal communication, May 26, 2024), a sitting MNA of PTI, said that: "*It is a fact that Imran Khan naturally doesn't give space to his political opponent. In later cases, even the establishment tried to convince him to talk to the opposition, but he refused*". S. Fareed (personal communication, May 31, 2024), a sitting MNA belonging to PML-N, also held that the behavior of PTI, both as a governing party (2018-2022) and as an opposition (2022-2023) remained the same: constant criticism, blaming and giving threats to the opponent parties. Likewise, Respondent No. 13 (personal communication, May 29, 2024), an associate professor at a public-sector university, noted that the PTI government preferred to send the opposition to jail on one pretext or the other. Almost all the main leadership of the PML-N and the PPP were jailed several times during this period.

According to Respondent No. 2 (personal communication, May 14, 2024), a sitting senator of PPP, it wouldn't be wrong to say, that throughout the history of Pakistan the PTI conduct towards its opposition was the worst of its kind. Because most of the time it engaged the opposition with politically made legal issues, NAB cases and media trials. He said:

"There must be some sort of relationship between the government and opposition, because politics is always about negotiating, deal making, agreeing, disagreeing, but still talking. You may have differences within your own party on certain legislation, but then you keep on talking and trying to convince them. Or if you do not convince them, just neutralize them by talking to them. But when you say that we are not going to talk to them. That is the politics of exclusion, which is very dangerous for a democratic system, because that brings polarization into politics. That's why people like us are more critical of the PTI government than any other government. Of course, in the 1990s there was polarized politics between the PML-N and the PPP. But you will still see some kind of negotiation taking place between them from back door channels. But here we see the doors are completely shut and that is most probably because Imran was of the view that he was backed by the establishment, so he did not need to talk to anyone else. Imran khan also used to say that the establishment doesn't have other options than him. This thought had made him stronger not only to avoid the opposition but to eliminate it."

N. Mirza (personal communication, May 28, 2024), a senior professor at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, explained that during the given era (2018-2022) the government did not want the opposition

to participate in the legislative process. He said:

"Though the opposition was quite strong numerically, with the support of some extra-political forces, the governments remained successful in suppressing the opposition, so that it could pose no challenge to the functioning of the government. It never gave any opportunity to the opposition parties to participate in parliamentary debates in a respectful manner, to express dissenting views or presenting policy alternatives. In rare cases when the opposition got chances to present alternative policies, such suggestions of the opposition were not listened to. Instead of engaging the opposition in parliamentary activities the PTI government kept initiating political cases against its main leadership. Their main effort has remained to crush the opposition and try to their level best to ensure that the opposition leaders remain engaged in dealing with the court cases and other crises, instead of taking part in effective legislation".

2. Framing the Opposition as a National Threat

Imran Khan, like many of his party leaderships, consistently portrayed the political opposition not as a competing force within a democratic system, but as the root cause of Pakistan's problems. At one point, he even declared the opposition to be the biggest problem of Pakistan, signaling a fundamental shift from democratic pluralism toward a politics of exclusion. Such framing delegitimizes the role of opposition in governance, equates disagreements with disloyalty, and paves the way for justifying authoritarian responses to political competition, a key feature of competitive authoritarian regimes. Supporting this view, upon contacting the targeted respondents, 20 out of 24 (83.3%) responded that Imran Khan, while portraying the opposition as a major threat to the state, was fully determined to eliminate the main leadership of the opposition parties. The remaining 4 respondents (16.7%) including two parliamentarians belonging to the PTI described the government's behavior as not so harsh, arguing that it was not a new phenomenon in the parliamentary system. They also tried to justify it on the grounds that the opposition had also insulted Imran Khan at the time of his oath-taking ceremony as prime minister.

According to Respondent No. 13 (personal communication, May 29, 2024), an associate professor at a public-sector university, Imran Khan and some of his party leaders were planning even to eliminate the main leadership of the opposition parties.

"Once during a discussion with the then Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, when the General asked, that what is the biggest issue of Pakistan facing right now, he replied "The opposition". Similarly, the PTI minister Faisal Vawda once said on the floor of the National Assembly that, all the problems of Pakistan will be automatically solved if we hang 5000 politicians. He was also referring to the opposition leadership. So, these gave rise to zero-sum politics. Resultantly, Pakistan witnessed the politics of antagonism, leg-pulling, conspiracy, fraud and opposition for the sake of opposition".

Respondent No. 12 (personal communication, May 10, 2024), a senior professor at a public university, said that:

"In fact, the leaderships of the PML-N and the PPP were the main targets of the then government. It was a troika of the Prime Minister Imran Khan, the Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and the Chief Justice of Pakistan Justice Saqib Nisar to crush the opposition, especially the leadership of PML-N and PPP. During this campaign even the judiciary was not left whenever any judge dared to resist the directions. The proceedings against Justice Qazi Faiz Isa in front of Supreme Judicial Council are the best example of it."

Respondent No. 5 (personal communication, May 27, 2024), a sitting MNA of PPP, also admitted that the PTI government was very cruel toward opposition.

"The PTI government was very strong in the sense that it had the support from the military establishment, superior judiciary, the NAB and the media, while the opposition was very weak having no support from any side. Therefore, the government inflicted all kinds of atrocities on the opposition parties aiming to eliminate them altogether."

Respondent No. 10 (personal communication, May 23, 2024), an associate professor at a public university, said, that

"It is very normal in Pakistan that governments generally do not accommodate or encourage the opposition to participate in policy initiatives. However, the situation worsened significantly during the PTI regime. This time the government took one more step by trying its best to eliminate the opposition parties altogether".

According to Respondent No. 3 (personal communication, May 25, 2024), an ex-MNA belonging to JI, by design, opposition was cornered to wall during the PTI government. The opposition's role was limited, but still better. The biggest challenge to opposition was to curb any bill brought by the government. The settlement of differences was mostly settled on streets than on table. Similarly, Respondent No. 4 (personal communication, May 25, 2024), a senior faculty member at a public university, mentioned that the government and establishment being on one page didn't leave any stone unturned to suppress, discourage, sideline and torture the opposition.

"Most of the leaderships like; Nawaz Sharif, Shahbaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz, Hamza Shahbaz, Asif Zardari, Faryal Talpur, Khursheed Shah, Saad Rafiq, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Rana Sana Ullah etc. were jailed under different charges to down their morale. When it comes to the vote of no confidence in 2022, it became possible after the breakup between PTI and the establishment."

According to Respondent No. 14 (personal communication, May 16, 2024), a senior professor at a public university, Imran Khan, proved to be a mythological character. He behaved like a man of the mythological world, where the creature after sometimes becomes so powerful even to kill his creator. Imran did the same first with the opposition, then with the establishment. Political pluralism and the encouragement for opposition parties in state affairs become irrelevant before such person. Similarly, according to Respondent No. 2 (personal communication, May 14, 2024), a sitting senator of PPP, Imran Khan believed that the establishment had no option but to support him. This belief made him stronger, not only to withstand the opposition but also to overcome it.

3. Overreliance on the Military and the Presidency

Driven by its confrontational stance toward the opposition and unwillingness to engage in inclusive politics, the PTI contributed to a broader erosion of political pluralism within parliament. This self-inflicted isolation, combined with its weak legislative standing, compelled the party to rely heavily on the military establishment for parliamentary support and political continuity. Simultaneously, the presidency was frequently used to issue ordinances, enabling the government to bypass legislative scrutiny and concentrate power in the executive. As a result, during its tenure (2018-2022), the PTI government issued 77 Presidential ordinances, the highest number issued under any regime in the country's political history, while it managed to pass only 158 bills through Parliament, barely twice the number of ordinances (Hanif, 2022).

On contacting the respondents, they also held similar views, by saying that the government had highly reduced the role of parliament in policymaking. They remarked that Imran was not even ready to see the faces of opposition members in parliament; ordinances had become the primary mode of legislation, and opposition members often faced political cases, media trials, and judicial punishments during that era. According to Respondent No. 6 (personal communication, May 14, 2024), a senior

journalist, it was a unique government in the parliamentary history of Pakistan, where the PTI leadership itself admitted that it was the establishment which supported it even to get a bill passed by the parliament. *“Not to speak of allied parties, Imran Khan was not sure even about his own party members. This was the establishment which used to manage all the legislation for the government.”* L. Ali (personal communication, May 25, 2024), Bureau Chief, Neo News Peshawar, also held that government-opposition relations in Pakistan are unfortunately determined by the establishment.

“Whenever it likes, it starts supporting the government and whenever it likes, it starts supporting the opposition. That is why each time either the government remains unhappy with the establishment or the opposition, and unfortunately for this they target each other instead of the actual player. Coming to this period, there were multiple factors. Establishment at the top, then judicial activism, then Imran Khan’s undemocratic approach and his stance against the Charter of Democracy, then the NAB and last but not the least the political parties.”

Respondent No. 16 (personal communication, May 27, 2024), an assistant professor at a public-sector university, said that during this period most of the time the government preferred to have presidential ordinance instead of making laws through parliamentary debates. Similarly, N. Mirza (personal communication, May 28, 2024), a senior professor at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, also agreed that the PTI government not only sidelined the opposition but rather the whole Parliament. In the absence of a parliamentary process, it was naturally the establishment, the Prime Minister, and the President who were making policies.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Pakistan’s political system from 2018 to 2022 reflects a clear shift toward competitive authoritarianism. Across most dimensions of analysis, including the decline of political pluralism, the weakening of democratic cooperation, and the growing influence of unelected institutions, all twenty-four respondents unanimously agreed that democratic space contracted significantly during this period. The findings show that while formal democratic structures remained intact, their functioning increasingly favored the ruling party, consistent with the dynamics of hybrid regime. The only area where opinions differed was the government’s delegitimization of the opposition and the framing of opponents as national threats. A strong majority (20 respondents) viewed these practices as deliberate strategies to justify repression and consolidate power, while four respondents saw them as part of Pakistan’s long-standing adversarial political culture. This limited disagreement adds nuance but does not alter the broader conclusion that the PTI government’s actions contributed to a systematic narrowing of political competition.

Overall, the evidence strongly suggests that the 2018-2022 period marked a significant departure from the more pluralistic politics of the preceding decade, with the ruling party employing both institutional and discursive tools to weaken rivals. Consequently, Pakistan’s political environment during this time can be best understood as competitively authoritarian, neither fully democratic nor openly autocratic, but a hybrid system where power was increasingly centralized at the expense of political pluralism.

While the findings provide valuable understanding, the study has few limitations. Due to hardship in getting appointment with the political leadership the researcher relied on twenty-four respondents only, which, though sufficient, limits generalizability. Future studies could expand the number of respondents for broader validation. The study focused on 2018-2022 period only. Future studies covering the era 2022 onward could offer a more comprehensive picture of authoritarian dynamics in Pakistan. Future study could also examine the causes behind the transformation of the political system into competitive authoritarianism. Similarly, future research could also compare Pakistan’s experience

with other competitive authoritarian regimes to identify common patterns and context-specific dynamics.

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