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POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN PAKISTAN: HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES AND CONTEMPORARY PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the diverse functions of political parties in the democratic process in Pakistan, and it reviews the past experiences of political parties since 1947 and the current opportunities and challenges before the parties. It outlines some of the root causes of the predicament in early post-independence India, in the time of military rule, in the years of populist experiments and in the years of civilian rule, followed by military rule. It documents the important changes after the transition in 2008, such as constitutional changes, different party performances in government and institutional changes, in a situation of hybrid governance. The existing problems include high polarization, economic crises and complicated civil military relations and opportunities include judicial activism, civil society participation, the role of the diaspora and potential intra party reforms. Based on process tracing and thematic analysis, the article highlights some enduring conflicts between charismatic leadership and institutionalization as well as the effects of social media, urbanization, and the youth on party strategies. Party systems and their role in consolidation can be seen from the experiences of other countries around the process of transitioning to a democracy. All forward looking scenarios suggest a path towards a more inclusive reform of the democracy or additional hybridity in circumstances of continued structural imbalance. The analysis has pointed out the ongoing contribution of political parties in the evolution of Pakistan's democratic development, its governance performance and resilience in the complicated regional and global environment. In the end, institutional strengthening and adaptive strategies hold promise for breaking historical cycles in order to achieve sustainable democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Political Parties, Democratic Transition, Pakistan, Civil-Military Relations, Hybrid Regime, Party Institutionalization.

Introduction

Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has had a turbulent political history. Strong armed organizations have been in several cases in conflict with the successive civilian governments either by military coup or by powerful military participation in key state institutions. This clash has been an important factor in

the country's democratic hopes at times of authoritarianism (1958-1971; 1977-1988; 1999-2008). Although it has undergone several shifts towards elected government, the nation has never been able to establish stable civilian supremacy. Political parties are frequently used in pro-democracy movements to mobilize the people, but are often institutionally restricted and therefore have trouble performing. The shift from civilian to military regime shows the fundamental problems of the formation of democratic norms in the country (Siddiqi, 2007). These dynamics have shaped governance outcomes, economic policies, and national security priorities over the decades, leading to a complex situation with competing forces of democratic ideals and entrenched power structures.

Political parties have become an integral part of the process of Democratic consolidation in Pakistan. They raise people's demands, promote electoral contestation and legitimate representative institutions. Strong parties that have broad based support and internal democratic practices can help to bridge society's divisions and to facilitate accountability. However, in many cases, the parties in Pakistan are still dynastic and narrowly based which limits their capacity to contribute to the process of long-term democratic development. It comes into force when it is most needed in the continuous fight for the constitutional order, such as the Lawyers Movement 2007-2008. Good parties can help make the process of policy continuity, legislative oversight and peaceful transfer of power, all critical for the maturation of democracy. Studies on the weak party system have recently provided insights about a hybrid governance that coexists, where elected institutions coexist with unelected players (Mufti et al., 2020). It's an important move towards real deepening of democracy, namely, strengthening party institutionalization. Political parties have played important roles at key moments of democratic change but they are structurally weak, have been taken over by elites and have been subject to external influences, which has been the biggest obstacle to democratic continuity. But today's developments provide opportunities for more robust institutionalization. History lessons include examples of party erosion and loss of public confidence over its own unity as a result of personalization of leadership and patronage networks. Whereas in some cases, non-civilian actors have been able to influence at the cost of elected actors because of external pressures like geopolitics and national security.

But since that time (2008) there have been other experiences, including the possibility of completing full parliamentary terms, the 18th Constitutional amendment etc., that has gradually consolidated civilian control. Reform might be possible as a result of changes in youth engagement and attitudes in today's digital world and the expectations of the general public. All of these suggest that some changes in party organisation and the relationship between the party and the army may help to build democratic resilience in the future (Javid, 2018). However, the journey of democracy in Pakistan is still moving forward despite the hurdles and prospects. Political parties have been at the centre of the story of the relationship between civilian aspirations and institutional realities that has defined the post-

independence era. Elite supremacy must be challenged and inclusive organizations must be created to learn to break free from past trends of instability. Parties must be able to evolve and communicate varying constituencies if they are to lead the way towards future consolidation of democracy in the country amid economic and security challenges. The need for continued focus on institutional reform to bolster elected institutions (where constitutionally appropriate). Finally, with good political parties, Pakistan can turn its democratic aspirations into reality through good governance and participatory involvement of the people.

Literature Review

Democratic transition theory is a crucial conceptual background for analyzing the function of political parties in the dynamics of political change. From the mid-1970s onward, Samuel Huntington explained the spread of democratic regimes around the world as the third wave of democratization, which was brought about by a variety of reasons such as economic development, legitimacy crises of authoritarian regimes and demonstration effects across the borders. In this context, transitions take place via elite bargains, popular mobilization or external pressures and consolidation requires more institutional entrenchment. Linz and Stepan furthered this analysis by setting out the conditions for democratic consolidation, including an active civil society, an autonomous political society and the rule of law, a functioning state bureaucracy and an institutionalized economic society. This consolidation of democracy is achieved when there are no other games in town, when democracy becomes the only game played and all major players in the game accept democratic rules and procedures. In these models political parties are key intermediaries, which organize contestation, represent and aggregate interests and ensure accountability. Mainwaring and Scully emphasized the party system institutionalization, which is defined as stability in inter party competition, rootedness in the society, organizational strength and acceptance of the parties as the legitimate means of political action (Huntington, 1991; Linz & Stepan, 1996). Wherever there is weak institutionalization, there is volatility and personalism, and vulnerability to authoritarian reversals. These theoretical lenses help shed light on the effect of party systems on the durability of democratic gains in the presence of elite fragmentation and institutional imbalances. In Pakistan, such processes can be seen to have common problems in formal transfers, which, after several electoral cycles, have not resulted in fully consolidated democratic practices (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

Civil military relations, patronage politics and hybrid governance arrangements, as highlighted in the Pakistan specific scholarship, are important to understand the dynamics of party politics. Ayesha Jalal has provided historically informed accounts on how colonial pasts and post-colonial state formation worked to set a stage for authoritarianism in Pakistan vis-à-vis India, and the role that military-bureaucratic elites have played in limiting political processes. Similarly, Ayesha Siddiqa studied the economic and institutional strength of the military, which

sustains the hybrid regimes, hindering the way to real democracy deepening (Jalal, 1995; Siddiq, 2007). Patronage dynamics in political parties, including clientelistic ties and dynastic control, have been studied by Hassan Javid and Mariam Mufti (2022) and are seen to affect programmatic politics and democracy within parties. Their edited volume on Pakistani parties identifies and discusses the survival strategies of parties in the context of dictatorship and democracy and how parties swing between populist appeal and elite capture. The scholarship on hybrid regimes highlights the fact that military tutelage is not necessarily something that only exists in military regimes, but that it also extends to regimes that are conducted in civilian fashion, such as those in which electoral politics can be used to balance competing forces. Electoral behavior studies also reveal volatile behavior, as a result of changing alliances, economic grievances, and identity mobilization. Together, this literature represents a view of political parties as both change agents and also reinforcement agents, working in an environment that is relatively limited, and where the military bureaucratic rule is often more effective than civilian policies. Recent works also focus on the emergence of new parties and their role in the existing power dynamics, thus contributing to the understanding of changing patterns of democratic contestation (Mufti et al., 2020).

There is much that remains unexplored in terms of existing literature on the interplay between the party experiences of the past and current prospects of democratic consolidation in Pakistan. Although there are plenty of theoretical frameworks and country specific studies, few works combine long term historical trends with forward looking studies that explicitly learn from other transition contexts. The many analyses are still confined to particular moments of military intervention or electoral cycles and fail to follow how past institutional arrangements continue to limit or facilitate ongoing party transformation. Major issues include institutionalization versus personalization of parties, in which charisma and family control tend to be preferred over institutionalised party functioning (Javid & Mufti, 2020). The continued effects of the military bureaucratic predominance evokes intense debate on hybrid models as a stable equilibrium or as a transitional state in danger of being further undermined by the weakening of civilian control. Moreover, dynastic politics gives rise to debates on whether it brings stability in the form of networks of local connections or prevents democratic participation and policy innovation. A historical contemporary perspective that synthesizes these debates would help to improve the scholarly aspects of the analysis and provide more practical and pertinent advice for the improvement of party systems. Future studies might have more attention to the internal party democracy indicators, effects of digital mobilization and comparison of regions to shed light on routes for more resilient democratic institutions in Pakistan (Mufti et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

Despite several attempts to restore democracy in Pakistan, there is a constant instability in the democratic process as a result of its past history of direct military rule. Political parties, supposedly central to representative government, have structural problems: they do not have deep organizational roots, they have been ideologically fragmented, they have high levels of clientelism and they are highly dynastic. These internal weaknesses combine with external factors of frequent military intrusions, interference from bureaucracy and rigged electoral systems that erode civilian rule. It is a mixed political regime in which elected governments are set up under strong limitations and undermining public confidence, worsening governance deficits, and driving economic instability and social polarization. History has shown that there are cyclical trends of hope in times of transition and then reverse trends that do not allow for consolidation of democratic norms. A higher polarization, economic crises and change in civil military relationships further complicate opportunities for stable party led democracy in the contemporary context. It is a perennial conflict between the ideals of democracy and its realities that it presents as a challenge for political development and long term stability of Pakistan.

Objectives

- To examine historical experiences of major political parties (PML, PPP, PTI, etc.) in democratic movements and governance.
- To identify structural and institutional barriers to effective party functioning.
- To assess current prospects and reform possibilities for strengthening parties' contribution to democratic consolidation.
- To provide policy-relevant recommendations for enhancing democratic resilience.

Research Questions

- What historical patterns characterize the interaction between political parties, military establishments, and democratic processes?
- To what extent have factors like dynastic politics, ideological shifts, and electoral systems affected party institutionalization?
- What contemporary challenges and opportunities (e.g., digital mobilization, judicial activism, and economic pressures) influence party performance?
- What reforms could enhance the capacity of political parties to support sustainable democratic transition?

Research Methodology

Qualitative historical analytical approach has been used in this study along with contemporary case analysis to analyze the role of political parties in the democratic transitions in Pakistan. A research design can allow a nuanced understanding of long term patterns and recent developments through systematic examination of political processes over time. The party manifestos, national constitutions, Election Commission of Pakistan reports, parliamentary records and key leader speeches and available interviews are the primary sources of data. Secondary sources

include academic books, peer reviewed journal articles, think tank reports from the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Carnegie Endowment and detailed media archives. Process tracing is the main analytical approach for reconstructing past transitions and causal mechanisms, and thematic analysis is carried out to reveal contemporary opportunities and new challenges. The scope focuses on the main national political parties from 1947 to the present, and recognizes that it is necessarily limited by the incomplete availability of classified military party interactions and by the nature of often fast-changing politics. The research process is guided by ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, to ensure the integrity and respect for the participants, especially in cases where interviews are conducted.

Historical Experiences (1947–2008)

The initial years of Pakistan's post-independence history (1947–1958) showed the weakness in the basis of political parties. The Muslim League, the independence movement's chief organization, quickly faltered due to differences within and a lack of leadership. Weak civilian institutions were replaced by bureaucratic domination, with civil servants having an undue influence on policy and administration (Talbot, 1998). Without a strong party system, forming stable democratic governance was difficult, as governments were often changed and there were numerous periods of constitutional instability. This was a precedent for elite capture and institutional imbalances to come in the history of Pakistan (Jaffrelot, 2015). The military became a part of politics and was seen to be working together with the bureaucrats and army officers in their efforts to control the governance issues. These initial trends settled the understanding of the challenges faced by the transition from independence movement to the consolidation of democratic practice in the absence of institutionalized parties. The colonial legacy and the speedy formation of states have compounded these vulnerabilities, as they have failed to create strong representative institutions, according to scholars (Jalal, 1995). This period of formation marked the beginnings of splits in party unity which played a large role in later authoritarian developments (Cohen, 2004).

During the periods of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan, political parties were explicitly suppressed which led to national crisis. Ayub's military rule had brought the power to the centre through the Constitution of 1962 and the policy of Basic Democracies, which had given local control to the existing parties. Political activity was limited and organizational capability was undermined by the imprisonment or exile of opposition leaders (Ziring, 1997). The later rule of Yahya Khan witnessed the disastrous events of 1971 which include the loss of East Pakistan, failing to recognize the democratic demand and party based representation. The Party's suppression fostered local complaints and undermined the unity of the nation. These military regimes were a proof that restricting the political forces of the civilian population had devastating effects on the viability of the state (Ganguly, 2009). The eras highlighted the threats of charismatic military

leadership to institutional development, which on one hand, provided a temporary stability, on the other, and threatened the polity (Siddiq, 2007). These periods of party fragmentation had a lasting impact on the development of democracy in Pakistan (Haqqani, 2005).

Under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's leadership of the Pakistan People's Party, the party had made significant constitutional achievements, as well as had been mobilizing amongst the people, but Bishn Puri's character in the film suggests an authoritarian twist. The PPP was able to garner mass support using the socialist rhetoric and promise of reform and won elections in 1970. During the tenure of Bhutto the Constitution of 1973 was promulgated, which was a parliamentary system and also contained clauses about the autonomy of provinces. But his administration increasingly resorted to force, including nationalization and repression of opposition, leading him to clash with parts of society and the army (Jones, 2002). Both charismatic leadership and sustainable institutionalization were a mixture of such populist touches and centralistic control. The PPP's history was an illustration of the ability of parties to foster democratic development as well as their vulnerability to personalist tendencies. The gains made were reversed by subsequent military action in 1977 and political opposition was split (Javid & Mufti, 2020). Bhutto's legacy is a demonstration of the potentials for change and weaknesses in the system of party politics in Pakistan (Burki, 1980).

Overall, the Zia ul Haq period, the democratic transition of 1988-99 and the Musharraf period have been characterized by a process of transition and reversal in the Pakistani political sphere. Zia's religious policies and his promotion of elections based on nonparty principles led to a further polarization of parties and increased influence of the military (Nasr, 2001). From 1988 to 1999 an alternating government of PPPs and PMLs came, with governance failures, allegations of corruption and repeated interventions of the military in civilian affairs. Both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto's government or governments exhibited fragility of institutions and democracy (Waseem, 1994). The Legal Framework Order and controlled democracy as brought in by Musharraf's coup of 1999, was an attempt to create political results by selectively supporting parties (Hussain, 2018; Clary, 2020). In the end he was compelled to resign due to pressure of the Lawyers Movement and the changeover was made in 2008. Throughout all these decades, charismatic leadership was the most important factor in the political process, and party institutionalization failed to bring a lot of stability (Mufti et al., 2020). The current state of affairs provides lessons to be learned in regards to the need to improve organisational structures to avoid the historical trend of reversals (Adeney, 2021; Lieven, 2011; Shafqat, 2019).

Post-2008 Democratic Transition and Party Evolution

The transition of 2008 was a turning point in democratic revival in Pakistan as Charter of Democracy brought together the opposition parties against military dictatorship. Under this agreement, a special focus was placed on the rule of law,

electoral mandate, independence of the judiciary, and civilian control of institutions. The 18th Constitutional Amendment then transferred powers to provinces, removed the concurrent list and limited the discretionary powers of the President (in the name of civilian supremacy). These reforms were negotiated in part by political parties, which indicated a desire to keep to democratic rules, following years of authoritarian rule. However, the process of implementation was hampered by vested interests, and party-motivated change was limited. The transition period underlined the potential for cross party cooperation and the challenges of dealing with past civil military imbalances. Parties took advantage of the popular discontent against the previous regimes to bring back the supremacy of the Parliament, thus paving the way for further evolutionary changes in the political system (Shah, 2014).

The different major parties showed diverse ways of governing between 2008 and 2022. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government was able to serve its full term despite a number of threats and economic crises with a focus on constitutional amendments and the formation of coalitions. The Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz government focused on mega infrastructure projects and had to deal with judicial challenges and in-fighting in the party. The Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf era, since 2018, brought in a campaign strategy of Populist governance through anti-corruption campaigns, social welfare programs and youth engagement. Both sides' enactments showed both adjustments to modern-day stresses and some measure of continuity in terms of patronage and leadership roles. These experiences highlighted the difficulty in achieving effective and inclusive governance through electoral success (Rizvi, 2022).

Institutional developments of this period include the attempts to strengthen the Election Commission of Pakistan with enhanced autonomy and technological improvement in election process for transparent polling. Judicial decisions made greater and greater inroads into political developments, sometimes as a brake on the executive or as an element of instability. Devolution also brought about new forms of resource allocation and legislative powers under the 18th amendment, allowing for provincial experimentation in policy making. But difficulties still remained, especially in hybrid regime dynamics, in which unelected actors had a bearing on key decisions. Partisan rivalry often overlapped with accountability politics and a familial continuity was paralleled by a newfound populism fuelled by the PTI phenomenon. The use of social media and the rapid urbanization, combined with the huge population of young people forced parties to implement new strategies, including digital narratives and pitches to younger voters. These changes brought new life to party politics but also polarization and short termism in competitive strategies (Akhtar, 2018; Kaura, 2025).

Contemporary Challenges

Since 2022, polarization, weak coalition dynamics, harsh economic hardships, and intricate civil military relations have characterized Pakistan's political landscape.

Coalition governments have had close majorities, and faced challenges from within party disagreements and opposition protests, especially after the removal of the Imran Khan government. There are deep economic problems such as high inflation, burden of debt, IMF dependency which have affected governance capacity and public confidence. The civil-military relations continue to be important and the military still plays a significant role in the security and foreign policy areas. These factors constitute a "volatile environment" in which political parties have to consider both short term survival and longer term institutional objectives. Partisan polarization has entrenched polarization trends within society, making it difficult to reach a consensus on necessary reforms. All of these factors put the resilience of democratic processes to the test in the midst of this multi-layered crisis (Kaura, 2025).

Judicial activism, strong civil society networks, contributions from the diaspora and possible intra party democracy reforms are some of the opportunities for democratic advancement. There have been some interruptions of judicial independence on constitutional issues, and it has been a forum for accountability. Despite challenges, civil society groups and the media continue to push for transparency and rights protection. The Pakistani diaspora can provide financial remittances, intellectual capital and international advocacy that can aid reform efforts. Improving internal party structures, including more frequent elections to leadership positions and increasing youth representation, would increase the party's legitimacy and responsiveness. These can be ways for parties to move away from traditional patronage politics and toward more programmatic and inclusive politics. However, this requires a long-term effort from the political actors and a favourable institutional setting (BTI Transformation Index, 2026).

The risks to the prospects for democracy remain significant, including potential for increased military influence, sustained economic instability, regional security challenges and governance stress due to climate change. Additional military encroachments into the political sphere could lead to reduced civilian space and fairness of elections. Economy's fragility undermines social stability and trust in state institutions. The problems with Afghanistan and India continue to require attention, for fear that they will be used as an excuse for more security at the cost of democracy. Administrative capacities are challenged by climate vulnerabilities such as floods, and can lead to a worsening of regional inequities. Findings from comparative experiences in South Asian neighbors and transitioning democracies around the world indicate that, in order to overcome hybridity, there is a need to strengthen party institutionalization and civilian control over security institutions. The scenarios are forward looking, with possibilities of a gradual consolidation or inclusive reforms, or entrenched hybridity, in the event of structural imbalances. However, political parties play a crucial role in moving towards more resilient democratic outcomes (Fair, 2014; Rizvi, 2022).

Conclusion

Pakistan's political parties are key actors in the country's democratic transition, are at the centre of these transitions and faced significant structural challenges. Based on multiple experiences of military interventions since independence, there are clear patterns of charismatic mobilization, which is later undermined by institutional erosion, as parties often became the means for popular mobilization but were plagued by internal disintegration and external strains. In the post-2008 period, there were steps towards improvements, including constitutional changes and the successful completion of parliamentary terms, but the hybrid governance model continued to exist in a context of dynastic tendencies and populist waves. Modern opportunities rest on the ability to confront polarization, economic fragility and civil military imbalances and harness judicial activism, civil society strength and technological changes that are empowering the next generation. To overcome cycles of reversal, a priority of parties should be intra party democracy, programmatic agendas and inclusive representation. If hybridity is not institutionalised, it may postpone the end of hybridity; if it is institutionalised, it will be more accountable and resilient governance. There is a need for continued political commitment to build up civil institutions, build a consensus across parties on essential elements of democracy and integrate security objectives with constitutional principles. At the end of the day, strong political parties will continue to play a crucial role in making Pakistan's democratic ideals a lasting reality, making popular sovereignty a reality in terms of effective, legitimate and stable governance that can rise up to the challenges of the 21st century.

In future, Pakistan is at a crucial juncture at which it can either strengthen its democracy further or enter into a new phase of hybridity. The youthful age structure, digitalization and devolution of provinces provide good soil for party innovation in organization and citizen participation. But economic instability, regional security issues and climate threats require agile, forward-leaning leadership beyond short-term electoral considerations. Lessons learnt from South Asia and elsewhere show that successful transitions require parties to grow roots in society, to be independent of the state and to expect to lose elections. Transparency, accountability, and ideological clarity can restore the public's trust in Pakistan's parties and improve governance outcomes. The bottom line is that historical legacies are significant but that there are opportunities for positive developments in the present day. Parties can make goodwill gestures in the form of institutional strengthening and problem solving, and thus secure a future of consolidated democracy. Such a development would not only lead to stability in the Pakistani polity, but also add value to the stability in the region and the discourse on democracy around the globe and enable the country to harness the full potential of its diverse and resilient citizens.

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