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DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN PAKISTAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS, ELITES, AND CIVIL SOCIETY (2008-2023)

Sohail Maqsood Bhatti[*1], **Prof. Dr. Khawajah Alqama**[2]

[*1]*Phd Scholar, Minhaj University, Lahore*
[2]*Dean of Social Sciences, Minhaj University, Lahore*

Corresponding Author: *
Sohail Maqsood Bhatti
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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the democratic consolidation of Pakistan during the period 2008-2023 with a focus on institutions, elites, and civil society. It adopts a qualitative, comparative-historical framework, with integrated process tracing across four key episodes. It analyzes how constitutional engineering, the judicialization of politics, the administration of elections, civil–military relations, federal arrangements, and the information order collectively determine regime outcomes. The result is a finding of partial consolidation: regular elections and cutting-edge constitutional reforms, while expanding the formal democratic space, were accompanied by a security-sector dominance and a weak party institutionalization which encouraged elite bargaining. The parliamentary lack of oversight, especially in the budget, was complemented by the judiciary's expanded role which, having encouraged accountability, also politicized adjudication. The administration of elections improved, but the unresolved issues of campaign finance, dispute resolution, and the perception of neutrality remain. Devolution of power, while strengthening provincial autonomy, created unstable local governments which, in turn, weakened grassroots accountability. Civil society and, particularly through the internet, the independent media, were able to mobilize but suffered from regulatory and coercive control which muted their voice. The article calls for the consolidation of civic space and the institutionalization of elite contestation within predictable, democratic rules as the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Democratic consolidation; Pakistan; Civil–military relations; Electoral governance; Civil society.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the return to elected civilian rule in 2008, Pakistan has conducted regular national elections, attained significant constitutional reforms, and experienced the peaceful transfer of power. All of these are indicators of a democracy beginning to take root. Democracy, however, is not simply the conducting of elections. It also entails the absence of political mandate disputes, court interventions to resolve political conflicts, the pressure of the state on the media, and the role of the security sector in the domain of policy. Drawing on the work of Levitsky and Way (2010) and Schedler (2006), the description of democracy in Pakistan may be a "hybrid" or "competitive authoritarian" democracy. The question is not whether, since 2008, the country has passed the elections but whether the associated rules are durable, generally accepted, enforced, and constitute "the only game in town" (Linz and Stepan, 1996) for both the rulers and the adversarial political players.

The period covered in this article is 2008-2023, which encompasses four electoral cycles and multiple federal power transitions. Three interconnected domains which, in conjunction, determine multitude outcomes of regime are investigated. First, institutions are dissected: power and constitutional engineering, the judiciary and rule of law, the Election Commission and electoral laws, civil-military relations, central and local governments, and the informational regime composed of legacy and digital media. Second, the elites are investigated: the political party, the `electables`, and the technocratic/bureaucratic arbitrators of outcomes. Finally, the civil society realm is dealt with: professional and civil society associations and movements, the clergy and student bodies, capitalist and labor organizations, and the larger media. Each episode and reform are contextualized within Pakistan's longer civil-military balance (Shah, 2014) without resorting to mechanistic explanations, focusing instead on the problem of how the rules structure elite competition and how mobilization of society impacts the political frontier.

The analysis is guided by three research questions. How did institutional design and day-to-day practice—constitutional change, judicial authority, electoral governance, federal arrangements, and information regulation—shape democratic consolidation over 2008–2023? In what ways did elite strategies such as coalition-building, patronage, candidate selection, and the use of courts or arbiters strengthen or weaken rule-bound competition? And how did civil society, including digitally networked publics, influence accountability, the protection of rights, and the perceived legitimacy of elections and governments? These questions allow us to move from a checklist of events to a mechanism-focused explanation of why consolidation advanced in some areas and stalled or reversed in others.

For clarity, the article adopts standard definitions from the comparative politics literature. "Democratic consolidation" is the process by which democratic rules are accepted behaviorally, attitudinally, and constitutionally, so that major actors resolve conflicts within the democratic arena, citizens broadly view democracy as legitimate, and state institutions uphold constitutional constraints (Linz & Stepan, 1996). In a minimalist sense, consolidation implies reliable alternation of power through free and fair elections along with protections for basic civil liberties (Przeworski, 1991). A "hybrid regime," also termed "competitive authoritarianism," is a system where formal democratic institutions exist and elections are meaningful, but incumbents often tilt the playing field through unequal access to resources, pressure on media, legal or administrative hurdles for opponents, or selective enforcement (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006). "Civilian supremacy" means effective, rule-governed control by elected authorities over the military and intelligence services, including transparent budgets, policy oversight, and accountability for actions outside the law (Feaver, 1999; Huntington, 1957). Using these definitions helps evaluate Pakistan not only on the recurrence of elections but also on the strength of constraints, the protection of rights, and the quality of civilian control.

Methodologically, the article uses a qualitative, comparative-historical approach and process tracing to link reforms, crises, and critical episodes to outcomes on consolidation. It synthesizes legal and institutional change with high-salience confrontations and draws on multiple sources: constitutional texts and legislation, court judgments, party documents, election laws and reports, and widely used indices such as V-Dem and Freedom House to anchor trends in rights and procedures (Coppedge et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2023). While such indices have limits, they offer comparable signals across time and help situate Pakistan in a broader context.

This article has three main contributions. First, it provides an empirical contribution by integrating disparate timelines and developments into a coherent sequence and mapping the phases of consolidation and erosion. Second, it provides a theoretical contribution by synthesizing consolidation studies, hybrid-regime theory, and civil–military relations to detail the factors that pull Pakistan toward greater predictability and rule-bound competition, particularly court and Election Commission insulation, and civil society costs to elites when they break the law. Lastly, it provides a constructive contribution by

proposing a reform agenda that would enhance parliamentary control, clarify and streamline judicial powers, insulate the administration of elections, establish local government along with fiscal devolution, democratize political parties, and mitigate the media's freedom through commensurate digital regulation while remaining within the existing constitutional framework.

The rest of the article follows a logical order. First, it establishes a simple conceptual framework on the links between institutions, elites, civil society, and outcomes of consolidation, then it discusses the approaches and data. It posits a brief political chronology, 2008-2023, and then offers a more detailed account of the different institutional areas. After that, the analysis of elite behavior and civil society follows, then four illustrative episodes that clearly crystallize the functioning mechanisms accompany the analysis. In context consolidation, the second last part examines Pakistan based on the different criterion—power turnover, civil control, civil rights, institutionalization of the party system, local democracy, and civic trust—before an implications section and a short reform suggestion. In conclusion, the book is synthesized and outlined with plausible scenarios of further democratization or erosion of democracy. The primary focus is to escape generalization by presenting, as a first, a detailed account of the interrelations of the rules and actors, civic pressure included, and the processes that will make the democratic rules in Pakistan self-enforcing.

1.1. Significance of Study

The research outlines potential scholarship and policy horizons. As a work of empirical synthesis, it is the first integration of the mechanism-focused strands in the scholarship on Pakistan's post-2008 history across four electoral cycles. It combines constitutional redesign and judicial power, electoral governance, civil-military relations, civic mobilization in between, studying closely democratic consolidation. It also handles literature on consolidation and hybrid regimes by showing the flow of elite bargains between discretionary dead-hand (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Levitsky & Way, 2010) and rule-bound, and back. Politically, it suggests reforms in evidence-based actionable areas, including parliamentary scrutiny, defined judicial power, insulated electoral administration, civilian control, consolidated local governance, and proportionate digital regulation to potential users— legislators, judges, electoral administrators, and civic actors. Working democracy conceptually triangulating legal texts, critical junctures, and democracy-promoting indicators (V-Dem, Freedom House) provides key leverage points for democratic contestation in Pakistan and other hybrid systems with enduring praetorian legacies (Coppedge et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2023; Shah, 2014).

1.2. Review of Literature

The literature on democratic consolidation and hybrid regimes provides the main lenses for interpreting Pakistan's post-2008 trajectory. Classic accounts emphasize that consolidation occurs when democratic rules become behaviorally, attitudinally, and constitutionally "the only game in town," while transitions alone do not guarantee stability (Linz & Stepan, 1996; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). Hybrid-regime scholarship shows how competitive elections can coexist with an uneven playing field created through legal, administrative, and informational advantages (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006). Work on civil–military relations explains how civilian supremacy depends on rule-bound oversight of the coercive apparatus, a persistent challenge in Pakistan (Feaver, 1999; Huntington, 1957; Shah, 2014). Judicial politics research documents the courts' expanding role in constitutional adjudication and political arbitration, raising questions about accountability and politicization (Newberg, 1995). Studies of federalism and local government highlight how the 2000s–2010s decentralization push created opportunities for responsiveness but suffered from discontinuous local elections and weak fiscal devolution (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006). Finally, comparative indices provide trend signals on rights, participation, and institutional constraints, situating Pakistan within a broader pattern of global "autocratization" pressures (Coppedge et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2023).

Together, these strands suggest that Pakistan's experience is best read as a contingent, institution-mediated struggle in which elite bargains, referee insulation, and civic mobilization jointly shape consolidation.

1.3. Research Gap

Existing work explains elements of Pakistan's post-authoritarian trajectory but rarely integrates institutions, elites, and civil society into a single, mechanism-focused account for 2008–2023. Foundational theories of consolidation and hybrid regimes clarify concepts but are not tailored to Pakistan's specific referee institutions, party structures, and movement dynamics (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006). Studies on civil–military relations and judicial politics illuminate enduring praetorian influence and the courts' expanded role, yet often treat episodes in isolation or emphasize normative debates over causal pathways (Shah, 2014; Newberg, 1995; Jaffrelot, 2015). Research on decentralization maps design features but under examines how uneven local-government continuity and fiscal devolution feed back into national competition (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006). Finally, cross-national indices track rights and constraints but cannot, on their own, identify the mechanisms by which electoral management, judicial practices, media/digital regulation, and elite bargaining jointly move the system toward or away from consolidation (Coppedge et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2023). This article addresses these gaps by process-tracing critical episodes across four electoral cycles and triangulating legal-institutional change, elite strategies, and civic mobilization to specify the conditions under which democratic rules become self-enforcing in Pakistan.

1.4. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, comparative-historical design with process tracing and documentary analysis to explain how institutions, elites, and civil society shaped democratic consolidation in Pakistan from 2008 to 2023. Evidence is organized around four critical episodes and a continuous review of routine governance to identify mechanisms linking rules, actor strategies, and outcomes. Primary sources consist of official and legal documents and archival records: the Constitution and amendments (especially the Eighteenth Amendment), federal and provincial statutes, statutory rules and orders (SROs), parliamentary debates and committee reports (Hansard), budget and finance bills, Auditor-General reports, Election Commission notifications, delimitation orders, electoral results and dispute decisions, party constitutions and manifestos, superior court judgments and cause lists, federal and provincial local-government acts, National Finance Commission (NFC) awards, and regulatory instruments under PEMRA and PECA, together with authoritative press releases and gazette notifications. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarship and monographs on Pakistan's politics and civil–military relations, think-tank and NGO assessments (e.g., PILDAT, International Crisis Group), reputable media archives used for event reconstruction, and cross-national indices (e.g., V-Dem, Freedom House) to anchor trends in rights and institutional constraints. Analysis proceeds via qualitative content coding of documents into categories—rule changes, referee insulation, elite bargaining, civic mobilization, and effects on consolidation indicators—followed by pattern matching and congruence tests across episodes. Triangulation across independent documentary sources is used to mitigate bias; discrepant evidence is recorded and adjudicated through source hierarchy (primary legal texts and official records carry greater weight than commentary). As the research relies solely on publicly available documents and archival materials, no human-subjects procedures are implicated. The approach balances internal validity (mechanism tracing within episodes) with limited external leverage by situating Pakistan's trajectory against comparative benchmarks.

2. Political Timeline, 2008–2023

2008–2013. The post-Musharraf transition began with the 2008 general elections and a PPP-led coalition under Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani (later Raja Pervez Ashraf) and President Asif Ali Zardari. Two markers defined the period: the deepening of federalism and recurring executive–judicial conflict. The 7th

National Finance Commission (NFC) Award (signed December 30, 2009) increased the provincial share of the divisible pool and introduced multi-criteria distribution, while the Eighteenth Amendment (April 2010) reversed many centralizing legacies, enhanced parliamentary supremacy, and devolved wide-ranging subjects to provinces. Gilani was disqualified by the Supreme Court in June 2012 after a prolonged contempt case, underscoring the growing judicialization of politics. The five-year term nevertheless culminated in Pakistan's first civilian-to-civilian transfer of power via the May 11, 2013 general election—an inflection point for procedural consolidation.

2013–2018. The PML-N formed the federal government with Nawaz Sharif as prime minister after the 2013 polls. The period mixed legal-institutional reforms with intense contestation over mandate and accountability. A cycle of street politics—most notably the PTI/PAT sit-ins in Islamabad from August to December 2014—pressed for electoral reforms and the prime minister's resignation; the protests ended after the Army Public School (APS) massacre shifted national attention to counterterrorism. In early 2015, Parliament adopted the Twenty-First Constitutional Amendment and related Army Act changes to establish special military courts as part of the National Action Plan; the Supreme Court upheld the scheme later that year. On the electoral front, Parliament consolidated and modernized election law through the Elections Act, 2017; and, following the 2017 census, a constitutional amendment enabled fresh delimitations for the 2018 polls. The period closed with the Supreme Court's disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on July 28, 2017 in the Panama Papers case, triggering party realignments ahead of the next election.

2018–2022. In the July 25, 2018 general elections, a coalition government led by the PTI was formed, with Imran Khan taking office on August 18, 2018. This was shortly after the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, which had merged the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, requiring complex administrative and electoral integration. There was the economic turbulence accompanying the engagement with the IMF, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the domestic legislative pushes on electoral and information technology and regulation, with a marked and confrontational executive-over-opp position focusing on corruption/accountability. Under the 18th Amendment, center–province relations on the balance of power remained contentious. The government's term ended in April 2022 in a constitutional landmark sequence when the deputy speaker was ousted on the no-confidence motion, and the motion was served to dissolve the National Assembly. The Supreme Court struck down the dissolution on April 7, mandating the vote to take place, which Khan lost, paving the way for the election of opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif as prime minister, an unusual mid-term constitutional transition.

2022–2023. The PML-N coalition dealt with acute macroeconomic pressure and a legitimacy battle with the PTI. Escalating legal and political contests around the timing of provincial elections started in January 2023 when PTI-backed chief ministers in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies were dissolved, effectively triggering the legal and political contests around the timing of provincial elections. Concurrently, Parliament passed the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Act, 2023 to regulate the apex court's suo motu powers and the formation of case benches, which became a flashpoint in the wider public debate around the separation of powers. Following the violent nationwide protests after the arrest of Imran Khan on May 9, 2023, the federal government intensified the crackdown on the PTI by invoking Article 245 and deploying the army, while hundreds of detained protestors were charged under military and anti-terrorism legislation. With the 2023 digital census completed, fresh delimitation operations were announced by the Election Commission, which became effective on November 30. This effectively sequenced general elections to after 2023 and pushed it into the next constitutional window, with a caretaker government instituted in August 2023. This constellation of conditions—the contested timing for provincial elections, apex-court reform, the dictatorial dynamics of

protest policing and census-based delimitations—provides the closing context for consolidation at the end of 2023.

3. Institutions

3.1 Parliament & Constitutional Engineering

The most consequential redesign of Pakistan's political architecture in the study period was the Eighteenth Amendment (2010). It restored parliamentary supremacy after the Musharraf era by removing the president's power to dismiss governments under Article 58(2)(b), rebalancing the executive toward the prime minister, and redistributing authority to provinces by abolishing the Concurrent Legislative List. This devolution shifted policy responsibility in health, education, labor, culture, and local government, while strengthening provincial ownership over social sectors and service delivery. In tandem with the Seventh National Finance Commission (NFC) Award (2009), it altered fiscal federalism by increasing the provincial share of the divisible pool and weighting need-based criteria alongside population. Subsequent constitutional amendments were narrower in scope but politically salient: the Nineteenth Amendment adjusted the judicial appointments mechanism; the Twenty-First Amendment (2015) created military courts as an exceptional counterterrorism measure; the Twenty-Fourth Amendment (2017) enabled fresh delimitations after the 2017 census; and the Twenty-Fifth Amendment (2018) merged the Federally Administered Tribal Areas into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, initiating a complex, multi-year administrative integration. By 2023, this constitutional engineering had produced a durable formal template for a parliamentary federation—yet practice lagged design in several respects (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Shah, 2014).

Legislative productivity varied across terms and tiers. Parliament enacted landmark framework laws—the Elections Act 2017; the Right of Access to Information at the federal level; key human-rights and criminal-law updates; and finance bills that embedded incremental tax and regulatory changes. Still, ordinary-session productivity was punctuated by political crises, frequent quorum breaks, and the strategic use of ordinances by the executive to bypass routine committee scrutiny. Committee systems—especially the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and standing committees—displayed pockets of oversight (e.g., calling regulators and ministries for evidence, surfacing audit paras, and pushing for compliance with procurement and audit rules). Yet committee influence on budgetary priorities remained modest. Pakistan's annual budget process, though formally governed by rules of procedure and supported by the Auditor-General and PAC follow-up, was constrained by compressed timelines, limited access to disaggregated data for lawmakers, party discipline that curbed backbench autonomy, and episodic reliance on supplementary grants. Together, these features bounded Parliament's ability to shape the fiscal state or to translate devolution into sustained policy learning at the center.

There are two more institutional frictions worth highlighting. To begin with, the center–province interaction post the Eighteenth Amendment anticipated the need to cooperative federalism, i. e., intergovernmental forums, data standards, and sectoral coordination. While the Council of Common Interests (CCI) did gather more often than in the 1990s, a good portion of the agenda still seemed to respond to crises rather than to the more systematic and steady harmonization of policy. In the second instance, national-security oversight by Parliament remained largely limited. While the National Security Committee (NSC) offered a consultative opportunity, statutory committees still had very limited access to defense planning, procurement, and intelligence budgets, and most civil-military interaction remained cloaked. The overall picture, therefore, is one of a legislature that has codified the most important democratic rules and federal bargains, yet in the daily, practical dimension has had very little to "thick" democratic consolidation (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006) in the supervision of the purse and the sword.

3.2 Judiciary & Rule of Law

Judicial empowerment was one of the defining institutional shifts of the period. Courts began taking on an increasingly expansive role in constitutional adjudication and political accountability after the Lawyers' Movement and

the post-2009 restoration of the superior judiciary. The Supreme Court began using its original jurisdiction powers under Article 184(3) and became a dominant player during the public interest litigation era. Courts began intervening on issues of governance failures, public procurement, and even political issues of public salience. This "judicialization of politics" worked in favor of the rule of law in many instances by exposing corruption, curtailing executive overreach, and enforcing constitutional discipline, but it also overstepped by adjudicating political disputes.

Two disqualifications of high-profile disqualifications marked different eras in time. In 2012, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's contempt was removed, and in 2017, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was disqualified regarding the Panama Papers. Though the legal implications differ, both decisions shaped coalition bargaining and the electoral landscape, exemplifying the interplay of judiciary timelines and regime-evidentiary standards. From a structural standpoint, recurrences are rooted in the bench composition, the courts' powers of sui motu, and the intertwining of the 'salus populi' doctrine with 'public interest'— and, in an ever-fluctuating manner, constitutional supremacy versus discretionary policymaking by the courts. By 2023, Parliament passed the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Act to impose internal case management and bench-making rules. While this reflected cross-institutional implications regarding the regularization of the apex-court's powers, the Act's constitutionality was questioned. The judiciary is perceived to operate as both guardians of the constitutional order, and a political referee during pivotal times (Newberg, 1995; Shah, 2014).

Below the apex, the rule-of-law environment exhibited asymmetries. Specialized courts (e.g., anti-terrorism courts, accountability courts) created expedited lanes that sometimes clashed with due process guarantees. Case backlogs and investigative capacity constraints limited timely adjudication, encouraging reliance on extraordinary forums (e.g., military courts under the Twenty-First Amendment). Regulatory litigation proliferated, with courts reviewing executive action in energy pricing, public-sector appointments, media regulation, and procurement. While judicial review can curb arbitrariness, hyper-activism risks policy uncertainty and substitution of judicial for legislative or executive discretion. For consolidation, the key question is not judicial power per se but whether its exercise is rule-bound, predictable, and even-handed across factions—conditions that reduce incentives for elites to pursue "court-centric" mandate contests as a routine political strategy (Schedler, 2006).

3.3 Electoral Management & Integrity

Electoral governance consolidated procedurally with the unification of fragmented statutes into the Elections Act 2017. The Act clarified the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) mandate, rules for delimitation, party finance and disclosure, campaign regulation, and dispute resolution. It also codified mechanisms to improve transparency—standardized forms for polling and results (e.g., Form-45), obligations to publish results by polling station, and clearer chains of custody. The ECP's capacity expanded in planning, logistics, training, and technology experimentation, even as implementation quality varied across provinces and constituencies.

Three stress points persisted. First, delimitation—completed after the 2017 census and again triggered by the 2023 digital census—remained politically sensitive, especially where population shifts and urbanization reweighted seats. While the legal criteria are clearer than in the past, stakeholders regularly challenged boundary decisions and the census basis, extending pre-election litigation cycles. Second, results transmission and tabulation processes were vulnerable to administrative and technological breakdowns, fueling perceptions that procedural uncertainty can tilt outcomes. Efforts to deploy or regulate technologies (e.g., result transmission, EVMs, biometric verification) generated partisan deadlock, with opposition parties often arguing that design choices threatened ballot secrecy or auditability. Third, dispute resolution timelines in election tribunals were not always met, leading to prolonged uncertainty in some contested constituencies and reduced ex-post deterrence against malpractices. Although the ECP demonstrated autonomy in several high-

salience decisions (e.g., schedule announcements, code-of-conduct enforcement), its perceived neutrality fluctuated with political polarization.

Party finance and candidate disclosures improved on paper, but enforcement capacity—audits, sanctions for non-compliance, and practical transparency for voters—remained limited. Campaign environment equity also varied with incumbency advantages in state media access, development-scheme visibility, and local administrative leverage. That said, the period witnessed two peaceful alternations in federal power via elections or parliamentary votes (2013 and 2022), a core test for electoral integrity in hybrid settings. The integrity challenge in Pakistan is thus less about the possibility of alternation and more about the consistency, timeliness, and credibility of the rules that govern how alternation occurs, particularly in close contests (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Freedom House, 2023).

3.4 Civil–Military Relations

Civil–military relations form the linchpin of Pakistan's democratic trajectory. The formal framework is unambiguous: elected civilians set policy; the military executes under constitutional subordination. In practice, the period under review reflected a negotiated equilibrium in which the security establishment retained agenda-setting influence in national security, foreign policy toward key partners, and aspects of internal security and counterterrorism. The NSC and core committees provided forums for consultation, but strategic direction frequently crystallized through informal channels. The post-2014 counterterrorism push (National Action Plan, special courts) expanded the military's operational latitude, while political governments sought to translate battlefield successes into sustained civilian control over internal security policy and policing reform—with mixed outcomes.

Patterns often described as "hybrid governance" emerged: elected executives governed day-to-day, but extra-institutional vetoes or facilitative support could shape coalition durability, opposition leverage, and media environments. Civilian attempts to assert oversight—through parliamentary committees, budget transparency for defense and intelligence, or judicial review of security-sector actions—met with institutional resistance or were traded off against short-term political bargains. Leadership succession and service-law questions (e.g., extensions) periodically became focal points of civil–military negotiation, underlining the need for rule clarity that insulates such decisions from personalized politics. For consolidation, two tests are central: whether governments can exercise effective, accountable control over the coercive apparatus; and whether security agencies remain publicly neutral in electoral and legislative bargaining. Progress was uneven. Civilian cabinets retained formal primacy but seldom achieved deep oversight capacity; the result was a hybrid equilibrium that permitted alternation yet constrained transformative rebalancing (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 1999; Shah, 2014).

3.5 Federalism & Local Government

Fiscal and administrative devolution is the most significant structural shift distinguishing the post-2008 order from earlier eras. The Seventh NFC Award increased provincial fiscal space and introduced need-sensitive criteria, while the Eighteenth Amendment entrenched provincial legislative authority in a wide array of social sectors. Provinces subsequently enacted their own sectoral policies, built regulatory bodies, and—crucially—adopted or revised local-government frameworks. On paper, this promised a multi-level governance system with policy closer to citizens and enhanced accountability through sub-provincial elections. The devolution of some functions, funds, and functionaries to local bodies was often done with hesitation by the provinces, Moderating these gains was the first obstacle. Delayed or staggered local-government elections meant several local councils were dissolved before terms were completed, aggravating the situation bureaucratic administrators. This attritional approach to democracy left local parties, civic supervision, systems of feedback and service delivery, to wither and, ultimately, mature. Intergovernmental functions and systems of coordination were uneven to the scale and extent of devolution, the second problem. The gap between the policy and the reality of inter-provincial equity and cohesion on health,

education, and social protection, was data harmonization and national standards.

While these limitations exist, federalism provides more opportunities for actors to wield veto power and try out new policies. The district high courts and legislatures became the sites where media and the control frameworks of policing, curricula, and other systems were contested and advanced – innovatively, in some cases, and in others, by reinforcing clientelism. The impact on the consolidation of democracy is paradoxical. Devolution control is dispersed and divided, diminishing the central risk of power capture in a dramatic coup, but with no robust and confident functional local government, bottom local accountability anchors have disappeared, likely further democratic political learning. According to consolidation theory, democratic norms take root most deeply through cross-logging competition and routine, interlocked games at different government levels. Pakistan's provincial tier has moved in that direction, but local tier remains the missing cog (Cheema, Khwaja, and Qadi, 2006; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

3.6 Information Order: Media, Digital Regulation

Pakistan's information order from 2008 to 2023 articulated vigorous contestation while combining tightening controls simultaneously. With political talk shows and exposés in investigative journalism that unveiled corruption, governance failures, and rights abuses, the private broadcast sector expanded. At the same time, both formal (licensing pressure, fines, suspension notices) and informal (government advertising, distribution disruptions) mechanisms were episodically deployed to discipline outlets or shape coverage amid heightened polarization. At moments, conditions for journalists became perilous, and the harassment and legal threats inflamed self-censorship, particularly concerning civil–military relations and high-stakes corruption scandals.

Digitally, the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and the subsequent rules on the 'removal and blocking of unlawful online content' sought to control online speech, cybersecurity, and data. State apparatus expanded significantly, requesting takedowns, investigating 'fake news,' and prosecuting unlawful online expression. Courts intermittently checked the State's apparatus ruling on overreach, due-process, and lack of civil rights. Political actors, across the spectrum, social-media mobilization, built rapid-response networks, and narrative warfare capabilities that transformed the organization of campaigns and protests. Online spaces became central to agenda setting and turnout, but also disinformation, targeted harassment, and polarization.

On consolidation, the signal is mixed. The plural media ecosystem and dense digitally public can discipline incumbents, expose wrongdoing, and lower coordination costs for civic action. Yet, when pressure, legal ambiguity, or coercion constrain media and digital speech, the cost of rule-breaking diminishes for powerful actors—blunting the twilight watchdog function that consolidation needs (Freedom House, 2023, Schedler, 2006). The policy challenge is balancing legitimate, albeit conflicting, targets—cybersecurity, protection from incitement and violence, and liability of platforms—against proportionate, rights-respecting regulation, and meaningful independent oversight. That balance remained unsettled by 2023.

4. Elites

4.1. Party system structure: dynasties, "electables," coalition politics

Across 2008–2023 Pakistan's party system combined strong labels with weak organization. Major parties—the PML-N, PPP, and, later, PTI—served as national umbrellas but relied heavily on provincial notables, kinship networks, and constituency brokers. Dynastic leadership remained the default at the apex (e.g., the Sharif and Bhutto-Zardari families), reinforcing personalization and reducing incentives to build routinized internal procedures. At the constituency level, "electables"—politicians with localized vote banks grounded in biradari/kinship ties, landownership, business patronage, and bureaucratic access—functioned as swing assets. Their pre- and post-election migration toward perceived winners produced bandwagon effects and volatile majorities, especially in Punjab and

parts of Sindh and Balochistan (Wilder, 1999; Waseem, 2006; Mohmand, 2019). Regional parties (e.g., MQM-P, JUI-F, ANP, PkMAP, GDA, BAP) and factional offshoots acted as pivotal coalition partners in hung parliaments and in the Senate, where staggered elections generate cross-party bargaining. The upshot is a coalitional political marketplace in which national manifestos matter symbolically, but cabinet formation, committee chairs, and development allocations hinge on elite pacts with fluid entry and exit options.

4.2. Intra-party democracy, candidate selection, financing

Intra-party democracy was procedural more than substantive. Parties complied with legal requirements to hold internal elections and file records with the Election Commission, but leadership contests were usually uncontested, and strategic decisions remained centralized among family principals or small executive councils. Candidate selection prioritized winnability and financing capacity over programmatic alignment: "ticket" awards regularly went to faction leaders who could mobilize sub-clan blocs, fund campaigns, and broker local state access. This logic rewarded personal followings and muted the emergence of ideologically coherent, policy-driven cadres (Waseem, 2006; Mohmand, 2019).

Party financing remained opaque despite the Elections Act 2017's disclosure and audit provisions. Formal accounts under-report in-kind support, third-party expenditures, and constituency-level spending by wealthy candidates. Business groups and affluent aspirants often underwrite campaigns, while public office provides visibility and networks that sustain the next electoral cycle. Enforcement capacity—routine audits, sanctions for non-compliance, public-facing transparency—lagged statutory intent, leaving voters with limited comparable information on money in politics. The financing equilibrium reinforces candidate-centered politics and deepens dependence on private patrons, crowding out investment in party schools, policy teams, and programmatic linkages that would otherwise strengthen institutionalization (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006; Freedom House, 2023).

4.3. Technocratic, judicial, and military elites in policy arbitration

A distinctive feature of the 2008–2023 period is the prominence of non-partisan elites as arbiters at critical junctures. Technocrats—central-bank governors, finance ministers, economic advisers, and regulatory chiefs—often negotiated with international lenders, designed stabilization packages, and drove regulatory reform. Their authority flowed less from party mandates than from expert credibility and perceived neutrality with external principals (IFIs, ratings agencies). While technocratic stewardship can deliver short-term stabilization, its political insulation also shifts accountability from party arenas to professional networks, creating tensions when distributional costs rise.

The judiciary acted as a powerful referee. Through high-visibility constitutional litigation and suo motu jurisdiction, the superior courts policed executive action, enforced procedural rules, and, in a few cases, reshaped partisan competition via disqualification verdicts. For elites, this created a parallel route for contestation—"court-centric politics"—in which adverse parliamentary arithmetic could be offset by legal strategies (Newberg, 1995; Siddique, 2015). The judiciary's legitimating power—its ability to certify or nullify political moves—thus became part of the bargaining calculus among party leaders and their breakaway factions.

The military remained a central, if variably visible, veto player in national security and parts of foreign and internal security policy. Even without overt intervention, its organizational cohesion, control of intelligence, and public legitimacy in security matters positioned it as the ultimate guarantor or withholder of support—an informal "umpire" role in elite bargains. Civilian cabinets relied on cooperative relations to govern smoothly; opposition coalitions courted neutrality to prevent destabilization. This hybrid governance equilibrium—elected governments handling routine administration while extra-institutional actors influence red-line domains—lowered the risk of abrupt breakdowns but inhibited the consolidation of purely civilian, rule-bounded arbitration (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 1999; Shah, 2014).

4.4. Patronage, clientelism, and center–province bargaining

Electoral competition unfolded within a clientelistic framework where voters prioritize access and responsiveness as much as ideology. Constituency MPs act as brokers who "fix" problems—utility connections, police cases, land records, small infrastructure—by leveraging ties to district administration and line departments. Where local governments are weak or intermittently dissolved, MPs substitute for municipal representation, blurring legislative and executive roles. This constituency service model rewards MPs who deliver tangible benefits quickly, pushing parties to allocate development funds (or promise them informally) and to tolerate cross-voting threats from backbenchers whose local standing exceeds party discipline (Wilder, 1999; Mohmand, 2019).

At the center–province interface, bargaining revolves around fiscal transfers, regulatory authority, and project placement. The Seventh NFC Award and the Eighteenth Amendment shifted resources and functions to provinces, but federal influence persisted through the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), federally funded initiatives, and control over key regulators and parastatals. Provinces, for their part, sought larger, predictable transfers and protection against ad hoc federal clawbacks during fiscal stress. The Council of Common Interests (CCI) functioned as a negotiation arena, but agenda-setting was crisis-driven rather than strategic. Political alignment (or misalignment) between federal and provincial governments shaped the temperature of bargaining: aligned governments eased intergovernmental transfers and flagship project rollouts; split control generated oversight confrontations, administrative friction, and legal challenges.

Chief ministers also decide the allocation of patronage politics within the oversees the allocation of development schemes at the local government determine the structure and design of local government frameworks. dominant parties sometimes adjusted local government regulations in order to shift urban and rural representation and centralize municipal control, which weakened the independent local bases that rivaled elite holders at the provincial level. In locations that were funded, local councils politically significant councils politically notable politics leverage control under rule in suspended councils. The persistence of such explained the greater focus parties place on charismatic leadership and programmatic organization structuring. The patronage returns with large immediate politically salient impact, while the returns to policy coherence remain deliver long term uncertain outcomes (Cheema et al., 2006).

4.5. Mechanisms and implications for consolidation

Four mechanisms link elite behavior to democratic consolidation. First, factional fluidity: the ease with which electables switch sides before or after elections raises uncertainty about government durability and incentivizes backstage arbitration. Anti-defection rules curb overt floor-crossing but do not eliminate informal bargaining or post-election alignments. Second, referee substitution: when disputes are routed to courts or informal umpires rather than resolved within parliament or by independent commissions, political losers are tempted to forum-shop, and winners to juridify their advantage. This elevates the role of non-elected elites and weakens incentives to invest in party organization and committee-based conflict resolution (Newberg, 1995; Siddique, 2015). Third, money and clientelism: opaque financing and constituency-service expectations push parties to prioritize wealth and brokerage capacity in ticket distribution, reproducing personalized power and suppressing intra-party pluralism (Mohmand, 2019; Waseem, 2006). Fourth, multi-level bargaining gaps: devolution without stable, empowered local governments forces MPs to be mini-executives, starving legislatures of time and expertise for oversight and policy, and making center–province relations transactional rather than rules-based (Cheema et al., 2006).

There are definitive consequences. For consolidation to take place, one must raise the elite shortcuts' opportunity costs and increase the gains to programmatic organizations. This requires the credible enforcement of party-finance disclosures, the predictable and time-bound resolution of electoral disputes, statutory insulation for "referees" (courts, ECP, auditors)

coupled with internal mechanisms that minimize discretionary case picking, and the entrenchment of tenure-secured, fiscally empowered local governments capable of taking on service-delivery responsibilities. These actions would prompt parties, over the course of time, to realign their competitive focus toward policies and performance, rather than access and arbitration, thus lessening dependence on dynastic principals and electable as the dominant carriers of political power (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006; Freedom House, 2023).

5. Civil Society

From 2007 to 2009, the lawyers' movement shaped post-2008 civic politics. By mobilizing bar associations and building networks with opposition parties and the media, it framed the independence of the judiciary as a constitutional right. This movement professionalized the use of marches, "long walks," and court boycotts, which the subsequent movements adopted (Ghias, 2010; Newberg, 1995). It thus expanded the normative space for claims of the rule of law. The bar's political institutionalization as a veto player crystallized, while the political elite's habituation to the litigation of political order disputes crystallized as a route for the judicialization of politics. In addition to the bar, the professional associations of doctors, teachers, and engineers, and other groups involved in public service sustained grievances over pay, and working and service conditions using strikes and other forms of protest which included the symbolic closure of their offices. Their disputes were usually settled with subnational authorities rather than with legislatures. The period following the mid-2010s saw stricter compliance frameworks for NGOs and INGOs, which included newly instituted registration and MoU arrangements, security vetting, and other AML/FATF-driven measures that restricted the flow of foreign funding. While these measures raised the required compliance transparency for civic organizations, the national-security measures remained a heightened barrier for rights-based organizations, research groups, and other civil organizations that monitor civic space (HRCP, 2023).

Between 2008 and 2023, protest forms were evident, routine, and varied. Sit-ins (dharnas), encampments, road blockades, and rallies in the city centers have become dominant tools for signaling determination and extracting concessions. Certain high-profile cases, such as the 2014 Islamabad sit-in led by PTI/PAT, the 2017 Faizabad blockade by TLP, marches of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement in 2018-19, and recurrent traders' "shutter-down" strikes, as well as the provincial encampments of nurses and teachers, captured attention for and showed the ability of non-violent disruption to shifted the national agenda (HRCP, 2020, 2023; Jaffrelot, 2015). These strategies lower the entry costs for widely dispersed groups to join, while also imposing social costs and attracting coercive police responses; courts have tried to deal with these social costs in an "ex-judicial" way, as with the Faizabad judgment. In time, tactical knowledge shifted as protests learned from one another. The combination of staging protests at key administrative nodes, synchronizing to prime-time television, and scheduling around budget cycles or major court hearings became widespread.

Religious organizations—ranging from welfare-oriented networks to groups with explicit political arms—were central to civic life. Faith-based welfare associations delivered services on a scale (education, health, relief), often outperforming state capacity in emergencies and shaping local legitimacy. Parties and movements with religious idioms maintained high mobilization potential, leveraging mosque networks, seminaries, and devotional events to aggregate supporters. Their street capacity set hard constraints on policymaking in blasphemy, curriculum, and public-order issues, evidenced by repeated negotiation cycles following blockades or demonstrations (Jaffrelot, 2015; HRCP, 2020). Student politics, long constrained by formal bans and campus regulation, re-emerged episodically. The Student Solidarity Marches (from 2018) signaled demand for union revival, campus safety, and accountability; some provinces took steps toward legal recognition of student unions, though implementation remained uneven (UNDP, 2018; HRCP, 2023). Organized labor's density stayed low, particularly in informal sectors, but federations

mounted issue-specific actions on wages and social security. Business associations—chambers and traders' bodies—remained powerful veto players on taxation, documentation, and retail digitization, coordinating nationwide closures that frequently compelled federal recalibration (HRCP, 2020; 2023).

Legacy media and journalists played a pivotal watchdog role but operated in a constrained risk environment. The liberalization of broadcast media before 2008 yielded a crowded talk-show sphere that amplified investigative reporting and hosted partisan contestation. Yet regulatory and informal pressures—PEMRA licensing actions, fines, channel suspensions, government advertising leverage, and distribution disruptions—were used episodically at moments of heightened polarization. Journalists faced threats, harassment suits, and occasional abductions; women reporters confronted targeted online abuse, a pattern documented by media-freedom groups and local rights organizations (RSF, 2023; HRCP, 2023). These pressures produced cycles of self-censorship, especially on civil–military relations and high-stakes corruption cases, while elevating independent digital outlets and YouTube commentary as alternative forums. Despite constraints, mainstream outlets, investigative desks, and editorial boards repeatedly surfaced graft scandals, maladministration, and rights violations, raising reputational costs for incumbents and shifting the national agenda—evidence of media's enduring capacity to discipline power when pluralism is preserved.

Digital civil society transformed collective action. Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp lowered coordination costs, enabled rapid scaling, and broadened participation beyond urban cores. Hashtags, live-streams, and volunteer mapping accelerated agenda-setting around elections, protests, disaster relief, and rights campaigns (e.g., Aurat March, missing persons, student union revival). Election-time civic tech—sample-based counts, form-photo repositories, crowdsourced incident logs—complemented observation networks and occasionally surfaced discrepancies faster than traditional media (FAFEN, 2018; PILDAT, 2019). At the same time, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016) and subsequent online-content rules expanded the state's investigative and takedown powers. While intended for cybersecurity and unlawful content, their broad drafting and uneven enforcement risked chilling legitimate dissent and journalistic inquiry (HRCP, 2023; DRF, 2021). Political actors across the spectrum built professionalized digital teams; coordinated inauthentic behavior, astroturfing, and smear campaigns became common. Disinformation swarms and gendered harassment targeted activists and reporters, degrading deliberation and deterring participation—particularly for women and minorities (DRF, 2021; RSF, 2023). Counter-measures—platform labeling, fact-checking desks, and digital-literacy workshops—emerged within civil society, but scale and resourcing lagged the velocity of networked propaganda.

Civic organizations maintained a thick presence in elections and accountability. FAFEN, PILDAT, bar councils, and local observer groups monitored pre-election fairness, campaign finance, and polling-day procedures; issued rapid assessments; and engaged the ECP on rules, forms, and dispute timelines. These efforts helped institutionalize transparency (e.g., standardized result forms, posting requirements) and kept integrity concerns in public view (FAFEN, 2018; PILDAT, 2019). Rights groups (e.g., HRCP) documented curbs on association and expression, advised on legislation, and litigated for access to information and due process (HRCP, 2020; 2023). Sectoral NGOs piloted civic-education modules and media-literacy programs, though curricular uptake remained modest. The cumulative effect was to ratchet up the reputational cost of openly manipulating elections while leaving intact subtler levers—resource asymmetries, administrative pressure, and litigation strategies—that continue to tilt the field.

Taken together, Pakistan's civil society expanded the bandwidth for voice and accountability but operated inside a contentious equilibrium. Its strengths—dense networks, protest know-how, media pluralism, and digital scale—raised the costs of extra-constitutional exits and helped sustain competitive elections. Its vulnerability, regulatory and financial squeeze on NGOs,

journalist insecurity, episodic internet controls, and disinformation-driven intimidation—limited its ability to entrench rights and counter elite shortcuts consistently. For democratic consolidation, the mechanisms are clear. When professional associations, rights groups, and observer networks can act predictably and safely, they insulate referees (courts, ECP) by adding scrutiny and evidence; when media can investigate without fear, they raise the price of rule-breaking; when digital publics are informed and resilient to manipulation, they discipline elites by amplifying credible information rather than coordinated smears. Conversely, when regulation is used punitively, when safety cannot be guaranteed, and when disinformation overwhelms verification, civil society's watchdog function blunts and political competition reverts to patronage and arbitration.

Building on previous observations, a reformed approach will first require legal predictability and consistency. PEMRA/PECA rules should be principled, proportionate, and prescriptive, with independent oversight, accessible review channels, and predictable court decisions that defend journalistic and civic speech (HRCP, 2023; DRF, 2021). Second, safety and accountability must be prioritized: one that includes the operational frameworks of witness and journalist protection, attacking the media-spurring independent prosecution, and public accountability and reporting on timelines (RSF, 2023). Third, enhance civic technology and surveillance with support of non-partisan election monitoring, provision of standard and open access to data by the ECP and public audits on the results transmission of the declared electoral results systems (FAFEN, 2018; PILDAT, 2019). Fourth, renew organized systems of student representation with their own codes of conduct and mediation on campus, to distract youthful aggression from violence and encourage rational discussion (UNDP, 2018). Fifth, compliance friction for bona fide civil society organizations should be minimized by risk-oriented AML regime controls and predictable MoU frameworks. These measures will not rid Pakistan of civil conflicts, but will allow civil society to reclaim its role as a constructive partner towards democracy.

6. Four Critical Episodes (comparative process tracing)

6.1 2009–2010: Constitutional redesign and devolution (Eighteenth Amendment)

Context and trigger. After the 2008 transition, all major parties faced a credibility test: could they unwind the hyper-presidential, centralized legacies of the 1999–2008 period and restore parliamentary federalism promised in the Charter of Democracy? The momentum of the lawyers' movement and the restoration of the superior judiciary raised the political cost of foot-dragging on constitutional reform (Ghias, 2010; Newberg, 1995).

Mechanism. A multiparty Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional Reforms engineered the Eighteenth Amendment (April 2010) as a package deal that (a) removed the president's power to dismiss governments under Article 58(2)(b), (b) abolished the Concurrent Legislative List and devolved wide social sectors to provinces, (c) strengthened judicial and election-management appointments through multiparty processes, and (d) re-centered executive authority in the prime minister and cabinet. In fiscal parallel, the Seventh National Finance Commission (NFC) Award (2009) expanded provincial shares and introduced broader criteria beyond population, aligning money with the new map of functions. A subsequent Nineteenth Amendment (2010) fine-tuned the judicial appointments mechanism.

Outcomes. Amendment formally Increased constraints on individual office-holders and the distribution of power across tiers (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Yet, the fragmentation of power necessitated coordination that the center and the provinces failed to sciably meet: intergovernmental forums were reactive and crisis driven, discordant line-ministry capacity, and local government stayed the missing piece as the provinces were reluctant to devolve funds, functions, and functionaries (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006). In terms of consolidation, the episode illustrates that rule-making by consensus can be cage elite restraint, yet, the absence of stable local tiers and thin parliamentary budget oversight, the everyday realization of devolution's promise remained constrained (Shah, 2014). By codifying parliamentary supremacy, regularizing referee

appointments, and institutionalizing fiscal federalism, the 2010 bargain escalated the cost of overt extra-constitutional exits and made future bouts more likely to occur within the foundational limits.

This episode demonstrates how, under certain conditions, constitutional engineering can push a hybrid regime toward consolidation. In this scenario, constitutional engineering works when: (1) parties offer side payments (fiscal, appointments) that make compliance reasonable; (2) referees (courts, ECP) gain enduring procedures that outlast individual players; and (3) veto players (provinces) get real power. The episode also illustrates the danger of reform with no implementation: where intergovernmental coordination and local-tier stability are insufficient, devolution's accountability benefits are effectively neutralized (Coppedge et al., 2023).

6.2 2014: Sit-in politics and mandate contestation

Context and trigger. The 2013 election delivered a clear federal mandate to PML-N but left significant opposition grievances about administration, counting, and dispute resolution. PTI and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) converted these into a months-long protest repertoire—marches to the capital, encampments (dharnas), and attempts to paralyze core government districts.

Mechanism. The sit-ins featured three distinct yet integrated components. Street pressure tactics included prolonged encampments and road blockades. These actions were designed to send a message of determination and to impose reputational costs on those in power, hoping to fracture ruling-party coalitions. The second component was the amplifying of media attention—through a 24/7 talk-show ecosystem and live feeds—which nationalized the narratives and brought to the fore claims of integrity. The third aspect was expectations management, with security actors and the judiciary providing arbitration cues to both sides regarding off-ramps and red lines (Jaffrelot, 2015; HRCP, 2020). The combination of tactics was aimed at exerting pressure without breaching limits that would provoke severe repression. The tragic APS attack in December 2014 was a pivot to counterterrorism and provided a face-saving exit.

Outcomes. The administration was able to continue, but the opposition achieved two victories: (a) the political acknowledgement that reforms regarding the electoral law, the transparency of results, and the timelines regarding disputes were necessary; and (b) the normalization of sit-ins as a legally accepted tactic of high-stakes opposition. A judicial commission examined certain issues relating to the 2013 polls and the 2017 Elections Act. Subsequently, Parliament consolidated and updated the electoral legislation. On the other hand, throughout the decade, the order of public facilities, law regarding the media, and criminal law were increasingly and systematically applied to control blockades and the protests- police law. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2020; 2023) documents these cycles and the increasingly invasive procedures.

Implications. Consolidation for the year 2014 was a mixed episode. On the one hand, the contestation was substantially within the constitutional/metaconstitutional limits—no blatant regime rupture occurred—and fed directly into procedural refinements (Elections Act, 2017) instituted thereafter. On the other hand, it entrenched dysfunctional politics as mundane routine mandate bargaining, encouraging all players to use street and litigation tactics to complement parliamentary defeat. The mechanism lesson is that, where referee insulation (ECP capacity, tribunal timelines) is weak, street pressure acts as a substitute for institutional redemption (Schedler, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

6.3 2017–2018: Panama verdicts, party realignments, and the 2018 polls

Context and trigger. The international leak of the Panama Papers led to internal lawsuits against the current prime minister. These included the appointment of a Joint Investigation Team, the Supreme Court's processes, and the legal disqualification of Nawaz Sharif in July 2017; each of which were disproportionate juridical milestones with systemic consequences.

Mechanism. Three channels mattered. First, judicialization of accountability: the apex

court's use of fundamental-rights jurisdiction and integrity clauses (e.g., Article 62(1)(f)) converted a transnational disclosure into a binding domestic disqualification. Second, party realignment incentives: uncertainty about leadership continuity encouraged "electables" and faction leaders, especially in Punjab, to reassess partisan bets ahead of 2018, amplifying defections and intra-elite bargaining. Third, legal-administrative reform: Parliament, facing a crisis of confidence in the rules of the game, passed the Elections Act 2017 consolidating election law, clarifying party finance/disclosure, codifying forms and results publication, and—after the 2017 census—enacting a constitutional fix for fresh delimitations.

Outcomes. Following the 2018 general election, Pakistan witnessed a coalition government led by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, which was the first time since the 1990s that the country saw a national-level political shift away from the two dominant political families. Several observation groups noted improvements in the clarity of the law and in the administration of the election, but also highlighted concerns regarding candidate harassment, the political-legal environments during the election, and delays in the tabulation and transmission of election results (FAFEN, 2018; PILDAT, 2019). This episode, therefore, raised and complicated the credibility bar: expanded legal integrity moved to the foreground, but perceptions of judicial and political neutrality remained contested and, thus, their politicization impelled compromise.

Implications. The Panama-to-polls study illustrates how a referee's authority may be contested and how it may be exercised when a referee is adjudicating disputes. Newberg (1995) argues that high-stake decisions can have subsequent electoral implications, where the losing side may perceive the judiciary as biased and the winning side may expect the politicization of courts as a part of the strategy. The degree of consolidation depends on whether such discretion is exercised through predictable internally governed systems (bench composition, selection of cases, standards of reasoning) and whether systems of electoral administration meet the criteria of timeliness, transparency, audibility, and enduring against whispers and breakdown. The 2017 Elections Act brought improvements but, the experience of 2018 highlighted additional shortcomings around the speed of dispute resolution, governance of technology, and the enforcement of strong party-finance (FAFEN, 2018; PILDAT, 2019; Freedom House, 2023).

6.4 2022–2023: No-confidence transition, protest–repression cycle, election-timing disputes

Context and trigger. In 2022, opposition parties brought a vote of no confidence against the PTI government. The deputy speaker dismissed the motion, and the PM advised dissolution. The Supreme Court restored the Assembly and ordered the vote to proceed. The opposition won; Shehbaz Sharif bowed and formed a coalition government. This unique and unprecedented situation demonstrated, with a remarkable clarity, the relationship between judicial review and parliamentary supremacy.

Mechanism. Two mechanisms strengthened consolidation. First, rule-bound alternation: an incumbent was removed mid-term through a parliamentary vote supervised by courts, establishing a template for crisis resolution without extra-constitutional intervention. Second, institutional signaling: the Court's insistence on the vote and the Assembly's compliance reinforced the primacy of constitutional procedure. Simultaneously, two mechanisms strained consolidation. First, contentious polarization: the ousted party framed the transition as illegitimate, mobilizing nationwide protests; after Imran Khan's arrest on May 9, 2023, demonstrations turned violent in places, inviting a muscular state response, the calling in of the army under Article 245, and a crackdown on the PTI ecosystem (HRCP, 2023). Second, electoral-timing uncertainty: dissolution of the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies in January 2023 triggered legal contests over provincial election dates; the 2023 digital census required fresh delimitation for national polls. The ECP's schedules and the tug-of-war among branches generated perceptions that referees were not fully insulated from political heat.

Outcomes. The period came to a close with a finalized caretaker arrangement, delimitation completed after the census, and national elections postponed beyond 2023. Parliament

enacted the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Act, 2023, which was an attempt to codify the internal judicial powers of bench formation and case management. This attempt at legislative clarity, however, was the subject of constitutional litigation. Protests and associated security measures triggered a heightened response from digital and media-speech regulators. Civil society, on the other hand, focused on the election-integrity and rights-framing issue, documenting these at considerable personal risk (HRCP, 2023; RSF, 2023). Overall, however, the consolidation result remained mixed. This was accentuated by a high-quality alternation in 2022, which was supervised by the court, and a subsequent period characterized by diminishing trust in procedural neutrality, which was impacted by the policing of protests, recurrent cycles of protest, and associated timing disputes.

Implications. This episode highlights one of the lessons pertaining to hybrid regimes: one clean alternation is not sufficient; consolidation requires repeated episodes where all the players accept varying losses under equilibrium predictable stable rules (Levitsky & Way 2010; Schedler 2006). There appear to be three design levers. First, time-bound dispute resolution—statutory clocks concerning the timelines for provincial and national elections and for tribunal decision clocks—constrains discretionary delays. Second, the internally regulated exercise of judicial power—structural transparency in bench-making, the articulation of rationales, and collaborative decision-making in consensus-seeking—could decrease the perception of politicization of the apex court's interventions. Third, Rights-respecting public order—the facilitated right to protest and predictable preemptive accountability in policing—empowers the civil society watchdog, minimizes the chances of maximalist mobilization, and controls protest and counter-protest policing. These characteristics are essential; the absence of which will normalize polarization and routinized forum-shopping. Parties will seek to gain the upper hand through the courts, the streets, or informal empires instead of the legislature and independent commissions.

Comparative synthesis across episodes

Read together, the four episodes map a mechanism trajectory rather than a simple rise or fall. Episode 1 (2010) shows that cross-party constitutional bargains can lock in elite restraint and disperse power, but implementation capacity (cooperative federalism; local tiers) determines how much restraint is experienced in daily politics. Episode 2 (2014) demonstrates how, in the absence of fully trusted electoral redress, opposition actors rationally adopt disruptive but nominally non-violent repertoires; governments respond with regulation and policing, pushing the system toward a contentious equilibrium that neither collapses nor consolidates. Episode 3 (2017–2018) reveals the double nature of judicial power: it can enforce integrity but, if unregulated internally, can also become a site of perceived partisan arbitration; the Elections Act 2017 improved the field but left holes that matter in close races. Episode 4 (2022–2023) proves that rule-bound alternation is feasible yet fragile when followed by protest-repression cycles and timing disputes that shake confidence in neutral referees.

Across all four, two cross-cutting variables predict movement toward consolidation: referee insulation (predictable, transparent, and procedurally bound apex-court, ECP, audit, and information regulators) and multi-level accountability (stable local governments, plural and safe media/digital spaces, and empowered parliamentary committees). Where these rise, elite incentives shift toward programmatic, rule-bounded competition; where they fall, clientelism, forum-shopping, and hybrid governance reassert themselves. The episodes also confirm the enduring relevance of civil–military relations: even when overt intervention is absent, the perceived neutrality or influence of the security establishment shapes coalition durability and opposition strategies (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 1999; Shah, 2014). Finally, each episode links to a concrete, feasible reform: operationalize cooperative federalism and local-tier stability (2010); complete the integrity chain—results transparency and tribunal clocks (2014/2018); codify internal judicial procedures (2017/2023); and legislate predictable election-

timing rules and rights-respecting protest management (2022–2023). Together, these would raise the opportunity cost of extra-parliamentary shortcuts and push Pakistan's hybrid equilibrium toward a self-enforcing democratic order.

7. Assessment Against Consolidation Indicators (≈1,100–1,300 words)

Alternation of power without extra-constitutional interruption. Between 2008 and 2023, Pakistan achieved regular national elections and two meaningful alternations in authority within constitutional channels: a full civilian-to-civilian handover after the 2013 polls and a mid-term alternation via a parliamentary vote of no confidence in April 2022. These episodes matter because consolidation presumes that losers accept outcomes and winners govern under the same rules they could later lose by (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Yet durability is uneven. The 2014 sit-ins normalized contentious street bargaining as a parallel route to press electoral claims; the 2017–2018 cycle linked leadership change to high-stakes litigation; and 2023 featured timing disputes around provincial and national polls. The net effect is a qualified pass: alternation is possible and has occurred, but its legitimacy remains contested when adjudicated through courts or in the shadow of disruptive protest, rather than through a universally trusted chain of electoral procedures (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006).

Civilian supremacy and security-sector oversight. Formally, the constitutional order places elected civilians at the apex. In practice, the period displays a negotiated equilibrium in which the security establishment retains agenda-setting influence over national security, aspects of foreign policy, and internal security operations. The post-2014 counterterrorism turn (including special military courts) deepened operational roles, while parliamentary and committee oversight of defense planning, procurement, and intelligence budgets remained thin. Civil governments alternated and at times sought to expand oversight, but leadership extensions, internal-security directives, and episodic civil–military frictions signaled the persistence of informal veto points. Consolidation theory treats effective, rule-bound civilian control over the coercive apparatus as a hard condition; Pakistan's progress is incremental—fewer overt ruptures, more consultation forums—but still short of routinized parliamentary control (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 1999; Shah, 2014).

Rights and freedoms trajectory (association, expression, due process). Rights protection improved in discrete areas (e.g., access-to-information regimes; some due-process jurisprudence), but the aggregate trajectory is mixed to negative after the mid-2010s. Civil society mobilization broadened, yet NGOs faced tighter registration and funding scrutiny; journalists encountered legal, economic, and physical pressures; and online speech came under expanded policing through PECA and subsequent rules. Protest management oscillated between facilitation and coercion, with landmark blockades prompting regulatory, judicial, and policing responses. Cross-national indicators record declines in freedoms of expression and association and in constraints on executive power across the later part of the period, placing Pakistan among cases experiencing "autocratization" pressures (Coppedge et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2023). The picture is not of wholesale rollback—elections remain competitive, rights claims reach courts, and investigative journalism persists—but of constrained pluralism that raises the costs of watchdog activity at politically sensitive moments.

Party organizational weaknesses and proportionate competition theory. The system of political parties in Pakistan is weak when it comes to organization despite the existence of strong political parties. Political parties are weakly institutionalized, primarily due to the dynastic nature of leadership, the candidate-centered approach, and the reliance on "electable" which enhances personalization at the expense of programmatic identity. Intraparty elections are legally mandated but are of little consequence and do not result in significant challenges to leadership or meaningful change. The Elections Act 2017 brought about some changes to the legal requirements to discharge party financing, but enforcement within the party system remains weak, due to the lack of routine audits, public accessibility of financing statements, and

sanctions. These dynamics rationalize the lack of investment in party schools and the long-term policy teams and frameworks, encouraging instead the constituency brokerage of short electoral cycles. The rise of PTI in the Pakistan political system brought about some programmatic discourse in the anticorruption and welfare reform debate, but this was quickly overshadowed by focus on coalition management and "electable" ticketing, which when subjected to first past-the-post systems almost entirely drives coalition management. Such organizational depth reveals the system consolidation is still at its peak.

Subnational democracy and policy discontinuity. Decentralized governance frameworks designed post-2008 with the dispersal of central authority and resources 18th Amendments and 7th NFC Awards claimed the center had moved away from centralizing tendencies of the previous era. From then on, provinces began legislating and self-regulating social sectors, developing high levels of bureaucratic autonomy, and claiming more decisive control over service delivery. A measure of power dispossession from the center, and the possibility of alternative channels of accountability, is significant. The enduring weakness and challenge, however, is the absence and capacity of the local tire. Instability results from the discontinuity of local governance and the arbitrary delay of local elections, shrinking tenure, and power reconfiguration of municipalities are detrimental to grassroots accountability and local leadership. The predictive capacity of provincial policy is a byproduct of discontinuity at the center, local governance systems, and the unevenness of administrative data. As a result, the net figure for the field is more democratic, and frictional federalism allows democracy to participate. More clear, the vertical component predicated on effective local governments, is the final in the remnant. (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006; Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Public confidence and legitimacy signals (from surveys and indices). Synthesis offers some guidance even when trust remains difficult to gauge. V-Dem, in its latest report, states that in the late 2010s/early 2020s, Pakistan's indices concerning the liberal-democracy and freedom components declined consecutively for several years. Defending democracy and liberalism enjoyed limited global support during those years. Pakistan is categorized as "Partly Free" under Freedom House's latest report, and along with media and civil society, rule-of-law also faced pressures during that time (Coppedge et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2023). Domestic reporting on the rights situation flagged risks journalists uncovered, and during flashpoints, protesters faced even greater risks. These situations were noted during elections as observers recorded improvements in procedures, but the bureaucratic environment for the campaigns and the resolution of disputes was inequitable. The nature of the situation speaks to legitimacy in the soft sense. Citizens are still participated in high numbers, civil society still mobilized, and there was alternation—but the trust in time-bound civil procedures and neutral referees is suspect. This lack of confidence in consolidated terms is what sustains a politics of outside options, street pressure, court actions, informal arbitrators, and other elements devoid of ballot- to-government linkage (Schedler, 2006).

Cross indicator synthesis. Within the scope of the six indicators, Pakistan sits at a hybrid equilibrium. The "big" procedural tests—elections, and alternation—are satisfactorily accomplished, while the "everyday" institutional assurances—civilian supremacy, strong rights, programmatic parties, stable local democracy, and high and constant confidence—are disappointing. Consolidation moves the system from or unto consolidation for the second time. First is referee insulation: where courts, the Election Commission, audit bodies, and information regulators work under predictable, transparent, time-bound, and professional norms. With these, elite incentives are the rule-bounded contestation. Legislative actions, such as the Elections Act 2017 and bench-management codification, are directionally positive, but practice (bench formation, dispute clocks, governance by technology, public reasoning, interstitial dispute, and dispute) needs deepening. The second is multi-level accountability: empowered local governments, plural and safe media/digital spaces, and effective parliamentary committees increase the number of arenas from which citizens can demand

performance, and where losers can accept defeat plausibly. Pakistan has made progress on federalism and electoral recurrence; it lags on local-tier stability and on the protection of civil and media freedoms during political hot moments.

What would move the needles. Consolidation is probabilistic and mechanism-driven. Concrete reforms aligned with these indicators include: (1) time-certain electoral justice—statutory clocks for pre-poll calendars, provincial and national election timing after dissolutions, and tribunal decisions—paired with auditable results-aggregation protocols; (2) rule-bound judicial power—transparent bench-making, reason-giving standards, and internal procedures that lower perceptions of partisan case selection; (3) parliamentary budget and security oversight—committee access to disaggregated fiscal data, medium-term expenditure frameworks, and structured, statutory review of defense and intelligence budgets; (4) tenure-secure local governments—constitutional or hard-statutory guarantees of terms, functions, and formula-based finance; (5) rights-respecting information regulation—narrowly tailored PEMRA/PECA rules with independent appellate review and credible journalist-safety mechanisms; and (6) party-finance enforcement—independent audits with public-facing, comparable reports to shift competition toward programmatic credibility. None of these eliminate conflict; all raise the opportunity cost of shortcuts and the payoff to compliance, which is the essence of democratic consolidation (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Linz & Stepan, 1996).

8. Discussion

To understand how Pakistan has changed since 2008, one must consider the ways institutions resolve elite conflict and deal with pressure from civil society. When the referees–primarily the courts and the Election Commission–act in predictable, transparent, and timely manners, it becomes expensive for winners and losers to shortcut the rules. On the other hand, ambiguity in the composition of benches, unresolved electoral disputes, and uneven compliance give rise to problems and encourage forum-shopping. The dynamics of civil society come in here. The multiplicity of the media and civic networks perform the watchdog and disciplining functions, but mostly it is until the evidence is in. The lack of protective laws for journalists and punitive controls on the internet foster self-censorship, and the costs of norm violation shrink. The mediation functions of federalism and devolution are also important. Strong, stable local governments provide new channels for the resolution of distributive conflicts and settlement of many disputes that originate from the center. They also get the political system accustomed to governing rule-controlled negotiations at much lower costs. When these lower levels are absent, the system collapses, and local MPs revert to personal clientelism, while political parties disengage from civic planning. This overburdens the national system and drives a reliance on extra-parliamentary means to resolve conflicts.

Two cross-cutting mechanisms therefore explain movement toward or away from consolidation: referee insulation and multi-level accountability. Insulated referees discourage brinkmanship by making outcomes more foreseeable and less personal; multi-level accountability reduces the stakes of any single arena, letting losers regroup without existential fear. Pakistan's trajectory between 2008 and 2023 shows both mechanisms in motion. The Elections Act 2017, improvements in results documentation, and steps to codify apex-court case management are positive. But delays in electoral litigation, perceptions of selective enforcement, and episodic pressure on media and NGOs continue to create outside options that elites rationally keep open (Schedler, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Freedom House, 2023). Depending on Path is visible in at least three strands. First, the Eighteenth Amendment created a durable federal bargain and parliamentary supremacy, but its very success dispersed authority to provinces without locking in a tenure-secure, fiscally empowered local tier. The unintended consequence is role confusion: provincial executives and MPs fill municipal gaps, blurring lines between legislation and administration and weakening committee oversight at the center. In the absence of stable local councils, parties face weak incentives to cultivate policy cadres or mid-level leadership, reinforcing reliance on

"electables" and personalized patronage. Second, the judicialization of politics—legitimized by the lawyers' movement and sustained by expansive suo motu practice—embedded courts as an accepted battleground for high-stakes conflict. This contributed to accountability in some cases, but also normalized court-centric politics: when judiciaries arbitrate leadership survival, partisan perceptions of neutrality are hard to avoid, and each cycle intensifies expectations that litigation will deliver what parliamentary arithmetic might deny (Newberg, 1995; Shah, 2014). The legislative response—bench-management codification—aims to regularize power but itself becomes contested, illustrating how rule-clarification can trigger new rounds of constitutional bargaining.

Lastly, the sequential order of the information produced a fundamental policy trade-off. The growth of pluralism and digital platforms improved the coordination of civic action and lowered the costs of civic action, making blatant electoral manipulation harder to pull off. However, the same systems allowed disinformation and targeted harassment on a massive scale, with regulators, via PEMRA actions and PECA and subsidiary rules, overreaching in a way that chilled meaningful speech and watchdog journalism. The consequence of this is a back-and-forth dynamic, with dynamic exposure to information and restricted scrutiny. The result is a convoluted equilibrium, rather than a seamless environment of robust accountability with evidence. The problem with, and the need for, regulation remains the same in judicial power.Path dependency effects coincides with the peculiar civil-military relations in Pakistan. Even with no direct rupture, the dominance of security-issue permeances in some domains leads elite coalition durability and neutral referees' concerns. Whenever political actors anticipate, seek, or fear, all the extra-institutional signals, they hedge in the parties (e.g., broker-inflated candidate selection), in the street (e.g., maximalist protest to increase costs), and in the courts (e.g., emergency petitions), aggravating the very hybrid rule governance that obstructs consolidation. Loosening this noose needs not just clarity statutes but also repeated record compliance. All the main actors need to experience, multiple times, that losing under the rules and then accepting the loss is a win.

When looking at nearby countries, Pakistan is in an unusual situation. Bangladesh, for example, illustrates the risks associated with removing trusted electoral referees. The contested elections and removal of the caretaker system led to one-sided dominance and closing of civic space. It not only reduced the likelihood of alternation but also deteriorated the democracy in quality. In India, the paradox is different. A strong electoral commission exists together with state-level alternation, increased central control, and growing control over media and civil society. The consequences of majoritarian rule over rights of minorities are a long-term concern. In Sri Lanka, the concentration of presidential power and a partial rollback led to a mass protest in 2022. It showed the power of civic protest to force the executive to change, but in a way that lacked a clear stabilizing Reform. In 2015, Nepal adopted a constitution that deepened federalization. It also showed that empowered municipalities can anchor democratic practice, even when national elite bargains are fluid. In this respect, Pakistan is unfortunate. It has no civil society.

The lesson is not for Pakistan to imitate any individual model, but rather to strengthen what it already has: federal dispersion and competitive national elections. The normative design features should come from countries that have addressed similar issues. Time-bound electoral justice and auditable results pipelines from post-1998 Indonesia. Early strengthening of the Election Commission of India and state-level alternation, where the focus-professionalized, insulated fielding during elections. Constituency- grounded local government, functions, tenure, and finance that withstand provincial cycles, from Nepal's municipal turn. Recent anti-corruption campaigns in Malaysia show the risk of personalization when party-finance control, independent prosecution, and anti-corruption mechanisms are absent.

A final implication concerns sequencing. Consolidation is often framed as a comprehensive project; in practice it advances through narrow, high-leverage fixes that change incentives. Three such fixes follow directly from

the mechanisms above. First, time-bounded, transparent electoral redress—statutory clocks for election calendars after dissolutions; enforceable deadlines for tribunal decisions; and public, machine-readable publication of polling-station results and tabulation logs—would diminish the payoff to street pressure and rumor. Second, internally regulated apex-court power—clear rules for bench constitution, reason-giving standards, and docket selection—would lower the perception that litigation outcomes are contingent on personalities, curbing court-centric politics without denying judicial review (Newberg, 1995). Third, tenure-secure local governments—with protected revenue shares, audit rules, and civil-service pipelines—would absorb distributive conflict at a level where it is cheaper to resolve, freeing parliament for policy and oversight and nudging parties toward programmatic competition (Cheema et al., 2006).

None of these eliminate polarization or the hard problems of civil–military normalization. They do, however, raise the opportunity cost of shortcuts and increase the expected returns to compliance—the essence of turning a hybrid equilibrium into a self-enforcing democratic order (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010). The study's episodes show that Pakistan can achieve rule-bound alternation and cross-party constitutional bargaining; the discussion here suggests how to convert those moments into habits. Consolidation ultimately depends less on a single reform than on repeated plays under stable rules in which all major actors learn that they can lose, recover, and win again—without leaving the arena.

10. Conclusion

This article has argued that Pakistan's post-2008 trajectory rests in a hybrid equilibrium: elections are regular and alternation is feasible (2013; 2022), yet the rules have not become fully self-enforcing. Across institutions, two mechanisms consistently determine direction of travel. First, referee insulation—predictable, transparent, time-bound procedures in the courts, the Election Commission, audit bodies, and information regulators—raises the cost of shortcuts; where it is weak, elites rationally resort to forum-shopping in courts and on the streets. Second, multi-level accountability—stable local governments, empowered provincial tiers, plural and safe media/digital spaces, and effective parliamentary committees—distributes conflict into cheaper arenas and helps losers accept defeat. Constitutional engineering since 2010 dispersed power and clarified formal roles, but gaps in electoral dispute timelines, bench management, parliamentary budgetary control, local-government stability, and rights protections kept consolidation partial by the end of 2023.

Two plausible scenarios follow. In a deepening path, statutory clocks for election timing and tribunal decisions, auditable results-aggregation pipelines, and internally regulated apex-court procedures reduce uncertainty; provincial autonomy is complemented by tenure-secure, fiscally protected local governments; parliament expands budget and security oversight; and information regulation becomes proportionate, rights-respecting, and reviewable. These shifts would increase the expected returns to compliance, nudging parties toward programmatic competition and reducing reliance on "electables" and informal arbiters. In an erosion path, polarization sustains court-centric politics and disruptive protest as routine bargaining; local tiers remain unstable; media and digital speech face episodic coercion; and security-sector influence in red-line domains continues off-stage. Under those conditions, elections persist but legitimacy erodes and governance becomes more discretionary, with higher risks around close contests.

A forward agenda for research should be mechanism-driven and data-rich. First, micro-institutional studies of referee insulation: original datasets on bench formation, case assignment, and reason-giving in apex courts; time-to-decision series for electoral tribunals; and ECP administrative logs for delimitation, results consolidation, and complaint resolution. Second, multi-level accountability: comparative subnational work that links the design and financing of local governments to constituency service loads on MPs, legislative time use, and oversight effectiveness, using panel administrative data and budget process tracing. Third, party organization and money: systematic audits of party finance disclosures,

constituency-level spending, and candidate selection, paired with voter-level surveys to test whether transparency shifts preferences from clientelism toward programmatic appeals. Fourth, information order: mixed-methods studies of journalist safety, takedown requests, and networked harassment, matched to agenda-setting outcomes and protest dynamics; evaluations of digital-literacy and fact-checking interventions. Finally, civil–military normalization warrants careful, legally grounded political-economy analysis that distinguishes statutory authority, budget transparency, and practice, and that tracks how incremental oversight changes alter elite expectations over repeated cycles.

Democratic consolidation is not a single leap but an accumulation of iterated, rule-bound losses and wins. Pakistan's experience since 2008 shows the capacity for constitutional bargains and lawful alternation. Converting those moments into habits requires narrowing discretion where it matters most and thickening accountability where it is currently thinnest. If actors repeatedly learn they can lose, recover, and compete again without leaving the arena, the hybrid equilibrium can give way to a self-enforcing democratic order.

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