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Pakistan's Political Paradox: Elected Governments, Unelected Power

Uzma Malik
Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of modern languages Islamabad
umalik@numl.edu.pk

ABSTRACT
Pakistan's Political Paradox: Elected Governments, Unelected Power examines the persistent asymmetry between formally elected civilian administrations and the dominant role of unelected institutions chiefly the military establishment in shaping policy and political outcomes. Tracing the historical roots from pre-independence military centrality through successive coups (1958, 1977, 1999) to contemporary hybrid arrangements, the study employs historical process tracing and a qualitative case-study approach to analyze post-2008 developments, including the 18th Amendment's limited success in rebalancing power, the 2018 engineered elections, the 2022 ouster of Imran Khan, and the 2025 27th Constitutional Amendment that institutionalized military primacy via the Chief of Defence Forces role. Drawing on hybrid regime theory (tutelary democracy and competitive authoritarianism) combined with civil-military imbalance models, the article dissects informal and formal mechanisms of control political engineering, media capture, judicial alignments, bureaucratic influence, and economic leverage through military conglomerates that sustain tutelary oversight beneath an electoral façade. Contemporary manifestations reveal elected governments functioning as junior partners, subordinated in security, foreign affairs, and strategic economic domains, while systematic suppression of opposition and institutional capture erode democratic substance. The analysis concludes that this adaptive hybridity ensures short-term regime stability but perpetuates long-term fragility, democratic backsliding, and governance inefficiency. Sustainable resolution requires structural reforms to establish genuine civilian supremacy, including defense oversight, economic demilitarization, judicial independence, and societal consensus against tutelary guardianship. Absent such transformation, Pakistan risks deeper authoritarian consolidation amid mounting internal and external pressures.

***Keywords**: Pakistan, Civil-Military Relations, Hybrid Regime, Tutelary Democracy, Military Establishment, Democratic Backsliding*

Introduction

Pakistan's political landscape embodies a stark paradox: the country holds regular elections and maintains elected civilian governments, yet substantive power frequently resides with unelected institutions, most prominently the military establishment often referred to as the "deep state" or "the establishment" (East Asia Forum, 2026). Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has experienced over three decades of direct military rule through coups in 1958, 1977, and 1999, with civilian interludes consistently marked by military oversight and intervention (Noor et al., 2025). These periods of direct control, interspersed with fragile civilian governance, have entrenched the armed forces as self-appointed guardians of national security and stability, often justifying their dominance amid geopolitical pressures such as Indo-Pak tensions and Afghan instability. The military's expansive role in state formation and security policy has normalized its veto authority over civilian decisions, perpetuating cycles of instability where elected leaders from the Bhutto and Sharif eras to contemporary administrations must negotiate survival

through uneasy alliances with the establishment (Middle East Institute, 2025). This historical asymmetry has evolved into a structural feature of Pakistani politics, where democratic processes provide legitimacy but rarely translate into autonomous civilian authority.

In contemporary governance, this paradox manifests as a hybrid regime blending electoral competition with informal and increasingly formalized control by unelected actors, particularly the military. Recent years have seen the establishment shift from overt interventions to subtler mechanisms like electoral engineering, media influence, judicial alignments, and institutional consolidation to shape outcomes while preserving democratic appearances (The Diplomat, 2025a). The 27th Constitutional Amendment, passed in November 2025, exemplifies this trend by creating the post of Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) held concurrently by the army chief granting unified command over the army, navy, and air force, abolishing the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee role, and providing lifelong immunity from prosecution for five-star officers like Field Marshal Asim Munir (Chatham House, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). This amendment, enacted amid limited debate and following Munir's promotion after the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, formalizes military primacy in security, nuclear oversight, and strategic domains, while curbing Supreme Court independence through new judicial mechanisms (Reuters, 2025; ConstitutionNet, 2025). Such developments underscore a deepening tutelary framework: civilian governments manage routine affairs, but the establishment retains directive influence over foreign policy, economic priorities, and political engineering, as seen in suppressed dissent and opposition crackdowns (East Asia Forum, 2026). This adaptation sustains regime stability amid insurgencies and external challenges yet accelerates democratic erosion by rendering elections more performative than sovereign.

At its core, Pakistan operates as a hybrid tutelary regime in which elected governments supply democratic legitimacy while remaining subordinate to unelected power centers, chiefly the military establishment that safeguards its institutional prerogatives through both informal leverage and now-constitutionalized tools (Noor et al., 2025; The Diplomat, 2025b). This thesis argues that the persistence of such asymmetry rooted in historical legacies and reinforced by recent institutional shifts like the 27th Amendment undermines policy coherence, public accountability, and genuine democratic consolidation, fostering instability and underdevelopment (Middle East Institute, 2025). Analytically, the military's self-conceived custodial role, amplified by great-power dynamics and internal security imperatives, justifies its dominance even as international norms advocate civilian supremacy. Breaking this cycle requires structural reforms: bolstering parliamentary oversight, reducing military economic influence, ensuring judicial independence, and building civilian capacity in security domains. Without such rebalancing, the hybrid model risks entrenching further authoritarian tendencies, demanding a fundamental transition from tutelary oversight to authentic civilian-led governance to secure Pakistan's democratic future.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on civil-military relations has long been anchored in foundational theories that elucidate the tensions and balances between armed forces and civilian authority, particularly in contexts of political instability. Samuel Huntington's seminal work posited "objective control" as the ideal mechanism for civilian supremacy, wherein military professionalism defined by expertise, responsibility, and corporations ensures the armed forces remain apolitical and subordinate to elected leaders, thereby minimizing intervention risks in democratic governance (Huntington, 1957). In contrast, Morris Janowitz advocated for "subjective control" through societal convergence, arguing that integrating military values with civilian norms fosters mutual understanding and prevents praetorianism, as the blurring of

civilian-military boundaries promotes accountability and shared social responsibilities (Janowitz, 1960). Samuel Finer extended this framework by examining military intervention motives, emphasizing opportunity structures like low political culture and institutional weaknesses that enable coups, while underscoring the military's disposition toward intervention when perceiving civilian incompetence (Finer, 1962). Recent applications of these theories in transitional states highlight their enduring relevance; for instance, Dakhouche (2024) critiques Huntington's separation model in favor of Janowitz's integration for post-colonial contexts, where military involvement in development and security blurs lines, potentially stabilizing but also entrenching hybrid power dynamics. In Pakistan, these theories illuminate persistent imbalances, as socio-political environments amplify military guardianship roles, often overriding civilian mandates (Singh, 2012).

Complementing civil-military theories, scholarship on hybrid regimes provides analytical tools to dissect systems blending democratic facades with authoritarian cores, including subtypes like electoral authoritarianism, tutelary democracy, and competitive authoritarianism. Electoral authoritarianism, as conceptualized by Schedler (2006), describes regimes where elections serve as tools for legitimation but are manipulated through uneven playing fields, ensuring incumbent dominance without genuine contestation. Tutelary democracy extends this by highlighting reserved domains were unelected actors, such as militaries, exercise veto power over policy, maintaining a veneer of electoral pluralism while curtailing civilian autonomy (Adeney, 2017). Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism framework posits that opposition competes meaningfully but faces systemic biases like media control and judicial interference, leading to regime persistence rather than democratization (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Concepts like the "deep state" informal networks of security and bureaucratic elites and informal institutions further enrich this analysis, as they enable covert influence beyond formal structures (Mohseni & Gilbert, 2012). Recent scholarship refines these models for multidimensional continua, arguing hybrid regimes are distinct types overlapping democracy and autocracy, with factors like civil liberties and power asymmetries determining their stability (Mufti, 2018). In Pakistan's context, these theories reveal how electoral processes mask military tutelage, fostering regime hybridization amid geopolitical pressures (Raza, 2023).

Pakistan-specific literature builds on these theories to unpack the military's entrenched dominance, often framed through economic, institutional, and alliance-based lenses. Ayesha Siddiqa's "Military Inc." dissects the armed forces' vast economic empire, including conglomerates like the Fauji Foundation, which generate financial autonomy and perpetuate influence over politics and policy, transforming the military into a self-sustaining "deep state" actor (Siddiqa, 2017). Hybrid regime models applied to Pakistan emphasize "establishmentarian democracy," where the military engineers coalitions and judicial alliances to maintain tutelary oversight, as seen in post-2008 transitions marked by informal control mechanisms like electoral rigging and media censorship (Shah, 2019). Analyses of the 2018-2023 period highlight judicial-military pacts that facilitated hybrid governance, with courts legitimizing military-backed governments while suppressing opposition, underscoring a shift from overt coups to sophisticated institutional capture (Noor et al., 2025). Scholars like Wolf (2025) detail the reconstitution of hybrid regimes in 2024, where military-civilian bargains preserved veto powers in security and economy, fragmenting party systems and eroding democratic norms (Wolf, 2025). This body of work reveals persistent patterns of military primacy, amplified by weak civilian institutions and geopolitical alliances, as explored in post-colonial comparisons across South Asia (Hameed, 2025).

Despite these advancements, significant gaps persist in the literature, particularly regarding recent overt military institutionalization within civilian facades and evolving paradoxes in the 2020s. While earlier studies focused on informal mechanisms, limited attention has been paid to formalized shifts like the 2025 constitutional amendments that entrenched military roles through bodies such as the Chief of Defence Forces, representing a move from covert tutelage to explicit hybridization (Ali, 2025). Tutelary hybrid regimes like Pakistan's remain understudied in democratic backsliding research, with scant exploration of how public administration and bureaucratic alignments facilitate military encroachment, leading to non-linear autocratization (Mufti, 2024). The 2020s' paradoxes such as intensified electoral engineering amid digital dissent and economic crises demand updated multidimensional analyses, as current scholarship often overlooks the interplay of global influences and internal insurgencies in sustaining regime persistence (Shah, 2026). Addressing these voids requires integrating real-time data on institutional reforms and elite bargains to better predict trajectories toward deeper authoritarianism or potential rebalancing (Salman, 2025).

Research Objectives

1. To examine the historical and structural roots of unelected power in Pakistan.
2. To analyze mechanisms through which unelected institutions influence or control elected governments.
3. To assess the implications of this paradox for democratic governance and state stability.
4. To propose pathways for rebalancing civil-military relations.

Research Questions

1. What historical and institutional factors have sustained unelected (military) dominance over elected governments in Pakistan?
2. How does the military establishment exercise power in the post-direct rule era (e.g., through informal mechanisms, hybrid arrangements, or institutional capture)?
3. In what ways does this paradox manifest in contemporary politics (e.g., electoral engineering, media control, judicial roles, and economic influence)?
4. What are the broader consequences for Pakistan's democracy, governance, and regional stability?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a predominantly qualitative methodology centered on historical process tracing and a single-country case study of Pakistan, designed to unpack the enduring paradox of elected civilian governments coexisting with dominant unelected power, particularly the military establishment. Historical process tracing allows for the systematic reconstruction of causal sequences by examining critical junctures, institutional decisions, elite bargains, and power shifts over time. The analysis concentrates on two key temporal windows: the post-2008 civilian era, beginning with the restoration of democracy after Musharraf’s rule and the passage of the 18th Amendment, which aimed to rebalance civil-military relations, and the more recent 2018-present phase, characterized by intensified hybrid dynamics, electoral contestation under tutelary oversight, judicial alignments, and the formal institutionalization of military primacy through constitutional changes in late 2025. By tracing these sequences, the study identifies recurring mechanisms such as informal vetoes, political engineering, and economic leverage that sustain military influence despite periodic democratic transitions. The case-study approach treats Pakistan as a theoretically rich instance of hybrid/tutelary regime persistence in a post-colonial, geopolitically volatile setting, enabling deep contextual understanding of how structural legacies, security imperatives, and elite pacts interact to reproduce asymmetric power relations.

Data are drawn exclusively from publicly accessible secondary sources to ensure transparency and replicability within the constraints of studying a highly securitized polity. These include scholarly monographs and journal articles on civil-military relations and regime types, official constitutional texts and amendment records, reputable media coverage from both domestic and international outlets, in-depth analyses produced by established think tanks, and verbatim public statements issued by civilian leaders, military spokespersons, and judicial authorities. Triangulation across these diverse materials helps mitigate potential source biases and construct a multi-perspective narrative of power distribution. The analytical framework synthesizes hybrid regime theory particularly concepts of tutelary democracy and competitive authoritarianism with civil-military imbalance models that emphasize organizational asymmetry, reserved domains, and informal institutions of control. This integrated lens structures the interpretation of empirical material, allowing the study to move beyond description toward explanation of why civilian supremacy remains elusive despite electoral regularity. A principal limitation stems from exclusive reliance on open-source information: sensitive internal deliberations within the military high command, classified security deliberations, and off-the-record elite negotiations are inaccessible, potentially leaving certain causal pathways partially obscured. This constraint is acknowledged throughout, with inferences carefully qualified and calls made for future research that may incorporate declassified archives or elite interviews once political conditions permit greater openness.

Historical Evolution of the Paradox

The historical foundations of Pakistan's political paradox where elected governments provide a democratic facade while unelected military power dominates trace back to the nation's pre- and post-independence era, when the military emerged as a central force in state-building amid institutional fragility and geopolitical insecurity. From its inception in 1947, Pakistan inherited a disproportionate military apparatus from British colonial structures, amplified by immediate existential threats from India and internal ethnic divisions, positioning the armed forces not merely as defenders but as architects of national cohesion and governance (Qaisar, 2025). This role crystallized in the 1958 coup led by General Ayub Khan, who ousted President Iskander Mirza amid political instability, justifying martial law as essential for modernization and anti-corruption reforms, thereby institutionalizing military supremacy over civilian institutions (Shahzad, 2025). Subsequent coups in 1977 under General Zia-ul-Haq, who deposed Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto citing electoral fraud and Islamist imperatives, and in 1999 by General Pervez Musharraf against Nawaz Sharif amid Kargil War fallout, entrenched a pattern of praetorian intervention (Finer, 1962; updated analysis in Dakhouche, 2024). These early takeovers, spanning over 33 years of direct rule, normalized the military's self-perceived guardianship, leveraging economic conglomerates and intelligence apparatuses to embed "deep state" influence, perpetuating the paradox of electoral legitimacy undercut by unelected veto power (Siddiqa, 2017; recent contextualization in Noor et al., 2025). Analytically, this foundation reveals structural asymmetries: weak civilian institutions, inherited from partition chaos, enabled military dominance, fostering a tutelary ethos that views democracy as subordinate to national security imperatives.

Pakistan's political history unfolds as cycles of direct military rule alternating with indirect influence, where civilian governments, ostensibly restored through elections, are systematically undermined by "soft coups" and informal mechanisms, sustaining the paradox of nominal democracy amid entrenched authoritarianism. Following Ayub's decade-long regime (1958-1969), which introduced controlled elections and economic militarization, civilian interludes like Bhutto's 1970s socialist reforms were abruptly terminated by Zia's 1977 intervention, imposing

Islamization and proxy warfare policies that reshaped society while suppressing dissent (Jaffrelot, 2015; contemporary review in Hameed, 2025). The 1980s-1990s saw fragile civilian administrations under Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif repeatedly dismissed via presidential decrees backed by military orchestration, exemplifying indirect leverage through judicial validations and economic coercion (Shah, 2019). Musharraf's 1999-2008 rule, legitimized by Supreme Court endorsements under the "doctrine of necessity," blended overt control with hybrid elements like manipulated referendums, further eroding civilian autonomy in foreign policy and security domains (Kureshi, 2024). These cycles highlight a vicious feedback loop: military interventions cite civilian corruption or incompetence, yet each episode expands the establishment's institutional footprint via defense budgets exceeding 3.8% of GDP and vast business empires while civilian regimes, fearing reprisals, accommodate rather than confront, perpetuating instability and democratic erosion (Wolf, 2025). These dynamic underscores the paradox's resilience: indirect influence preserves a veneer of pluralism, allowing global legitimacy, but invariably reverts to direct rule when threats to military prerogatives arise.

The transition to hybrid models post-2008 marked a sophisticated evolution of this paradox, where the 18th Amendment's devolutionary reforms aimed to bolster civilian authority but were counterbalanced by persistent military leverage in security, foreign affairs, and political engineering, culminating in recent consolidations that formalize tutelary dominance. The 2008 restoration of democracy, following Musharraf's resignation, introduced the 18th Amendment in 2010, decentralizing power to provinces and curtailing presidential overreach, ostensibly curbing military incursions (Adeney, 2017). Yet, the establishment retained vetoes over policy, as seen in the 2018 elections allegedly rigged to install Imran Khan's PTI via pre-poll manipulations and judicial alliances, birthing a "hybrid regime" where civilians governed under military oversight (Mufti, 2018; updated in Raza, 2023). Khan's 2022 ouster through a no-confidence vote, amid tensions with Army Chief Bajwa over foreign neutrality and intelligence appointments, exemplified "soft coup" tactics, with U.S. diplomatic pressures amplifying military orchestration (Khan, 2023). Recent developments, including the 2025 27th Amendment creating the Chief of Defence Forces role for Army Chief Asim Munir granting unified command and lifelong immunity entrench this hybridity, post the May 2025 Indo-Pak conflict, prioritizing military primacy amid regional tensions (Chatham House, 2025; The Diplomat, 2025). Analytically, this shift from overt to institutionalized tutelage sustains the paradox by adapting to global democratic norms while neutralizing civilian challenges, risking deeper authoritarianism unless countered by societal mobilization.

Contemporary Mechanisms and Manifestations

In contemporary Pakistan, the military establishment deploys a sophisticated array of informal and formal tools to maintain control, blending political engineering, media and bureaucratic influence, judicial alignments, and economic leverage to perpetuate its dominance over elected governments. Political engineering manifests through pre-electoral manipulations, such as candidate disqualifications and coalition orchestration, as seen in the lead-up to the 2024 polls where opposition figures faced selective accountability drives (Paracha, 2025). Media influence operates via ownership stakes in outlets and regulatory pressures, stifling dissent by promoting pro-establishment narratives while censoring critical voices through cyber laws and journalist harassments (Gul, 2026). Bureaucratic sway is exerted through intelligence-led appointments in key civil service roles, ensuring policy implementation aligns with military priorities. Judicial alignments further formalize this control, with courts often validating military-backed actions under doctrines like necessity, as evidenced by rulings that facilitated regime transitions (Kureshi, 2026). Economic leverage stems from the military's vast business empire,

encompassing conglomerates like the Fauji Foundation, which control sectors from real estate to fertilizers, generating autonomous revenue streams that insulate the establishment from civilian oversight and enable patronage networks (Pande, 2026). Analytically, these tools create a self-reinforcing ecosystem: informal pressures erode civilian agency, while formal institutional tweaks, such as expanded intelligence mandates, entrench unelected authority, transforming hybridity into a durable power asymmetry.

The hallmark features of Pakistan's hybrid regime include a facade of electoral competition masking tutelary oversight, systematic suppression of opposition, and pervasive institutional capture, all of which sustain the paradox of democratic rituals without substantive pluralism. Elections serve as legitimating spectacles, orchestrated to produce compliant coalitions while the military retains vetoes over reserved domains like security and foreign policy, exemplifying tutelary democracy where unelected guardians dictate boundaries (Asif, 2025). Suppression of opposition involves draconian measures, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and digital surveillance under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, targeting dissenters to fragment political challenges (Bokhari, 2025). Institutional capture extends to bodies like the Election Commission, co-opted through appointments and legal reforms to ensure electoral outcomes favor establishment allies, while bureaucratic and judicial entities are realigned via loyalty purges (Malik & Tudor, 2025). This configuration fosters competitive authoritarianism, where opposition competes under rigged rules, perpetuating regime stability amid economic woes and insurgencies but at the cost of eroding civil liberties and fostering public cynicism (Fitch Solutions, 2026). Thematically, these features underscore a strategic adaptation: hybridity allows international legitimacy through electoral optics, yet tutelary mechanisms ensure military primacy, risking long-term instability from suppressed grievances.

Recent events vividly illustrate elected governments functioning as junior partners, subordinated in policy domains like security and economy, alongside crackdowns on dissent that highlight the establishment's directive role. The 2025 Indo-Pak conflict and subsequent 27th Constitutional Amendment exemplify policy subordination: civilian leaders deferred to military strategy in the crisis, while the amendment formalized economic oversight through bodies like the Special Investment Facilitation Council, channeling foreign investments under military-led hybrid forums (Khan, 2026). In the economy, governments have ceded control to military-influenced policies, such as defense budget hikes amid fiscal austerity, prioritizing strategic imperatives over civilian development agendas (Security Risks Asia, 2025). Crackdowns on dissent, including the 2025 arrests of PTI leaders and media blackouts during protests, demonstrate how elected regimes execute establishment directives to neutralize threats, as seen in the post-2024 suppression waves that dismantled opposition networks (Shah, 2026). These cases reveal analytical depth: civilian subordination ensures short-term regime cohesion but amplifies paradoxes, as public governance facades crumble under visible military orchestration, fueling polarization and potential backlash.

The paradox in action crystallizes as civilian leaders publicly helm governance announcing budgets, diplomatic initiatives, and reforms while unelected forces wield veto or directive power, dictating outcomes in a shadow governance that undermines democratic authenticity. Prime Minister Sharif's administration, for instance, touts' economic recovery plans, yet military vetoes shape foreign alignments, such as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor decisions, rendering civilians as implementers rather than architects (Poudel, 2025). This duality manifests in public spectacles: elected officials address parliaments, but unelected intelligence briefs and judicial nods from aligned benches enforce compliance, as in the swift passage of military-favoring laws amid opposition boycotts (Haider, 2025). Directive power extends to crisis management, where

civilians echo establishment scripts on security threats, subordinating policy innovation to tutelary red lines (Iqbal, 2025). Vigorous in its implications, this action perpetuates inefficiency and alienation: public governance maintains legitimacy illusions, but veto dynamics stifle accountability, entrenching a cycle where hybrid facades mask authoritarian cores, demanding systemic rebalancing for sustainable progress.

Conclusion

Pakistan's enduring political paradox elected governments operating under the shadow of unelected military power represents one of the most resilient forms of hybrid governance in the contemporary world. Over seven decades, the country has oscillated between direct military rule and periods of civilian administration, yet the fundamental asymmetry has never been resolved. The post-2008 democratic transition, the 18th Amendment's promise of civilian empowerment, the 2018-2022 hybrid experiment under Imran Khan, the 2022 soft coup, and the 2025 constitutional changes that formalized military primacy through the Chief of Defence Forces role all illustrate a single underlying reality: civilian institutions provide procedural legitimacy and manage routine governance, while the military establishment retains veto authority over core domains national security, foreign policy, strategic economic decisions, and the parameters of acceptable political competition. This tutelary arrangement has proven remarkably adaptive. It allows the regime to maintain international recognition as a democracy, secure foreign aid and investment, and project stability amid insurgencies and regional rivalries, even as domestic pluralism, accountability, and policy coherence steadily erode. The result is a system that is stable in the short term but brittle in the long term: suppressed opposition, polarized society, economic dependence on military-linked conglomerates, and recurring cycles of protest and crackdown undermine the social contract and fuel alienation across classes and regions.

Breaking this paradox requires more than incremental reform or episodic civilian assertiveness; it demands a fundamental rebalancing of institutional power. Strengthening parliamentary oversight of defense budgets and security policy, dismantling the military's commercial empire through transparent privatization and civilian regulatory authority, insulating the judiciary from establishment influence, and rebuilding a professional, merit-based bureaucracy are essential first steps. Equally critical is fostering a political culture that values civilian supremacy over tutelary guardianship, supported by an independent media ecosystem and civil society capable of sustained mobilization. External actors' donors, multilateral institutions, and regional partners must condition support on measurable progress toward genuine civilian control rather than treating military dominance as an inevitable feature of Pakistani stability. Without such concerted domestic and international pressure, the hybrid model risks calcifying into overt authoritarianism, especially as economic crises deepen and digital dissent grows. Pakistan stands at a crossroads: it can either continue adapting the façade of democracy to preserve unelected dominance, or undertake the painful but necessary transition toward authentic civilian-led governance. The choice will determine whether the country remains trapped in cycles of instability and underdevelopment or finally realizes the democratic promise embedded in its founding vision.

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